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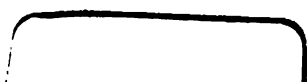
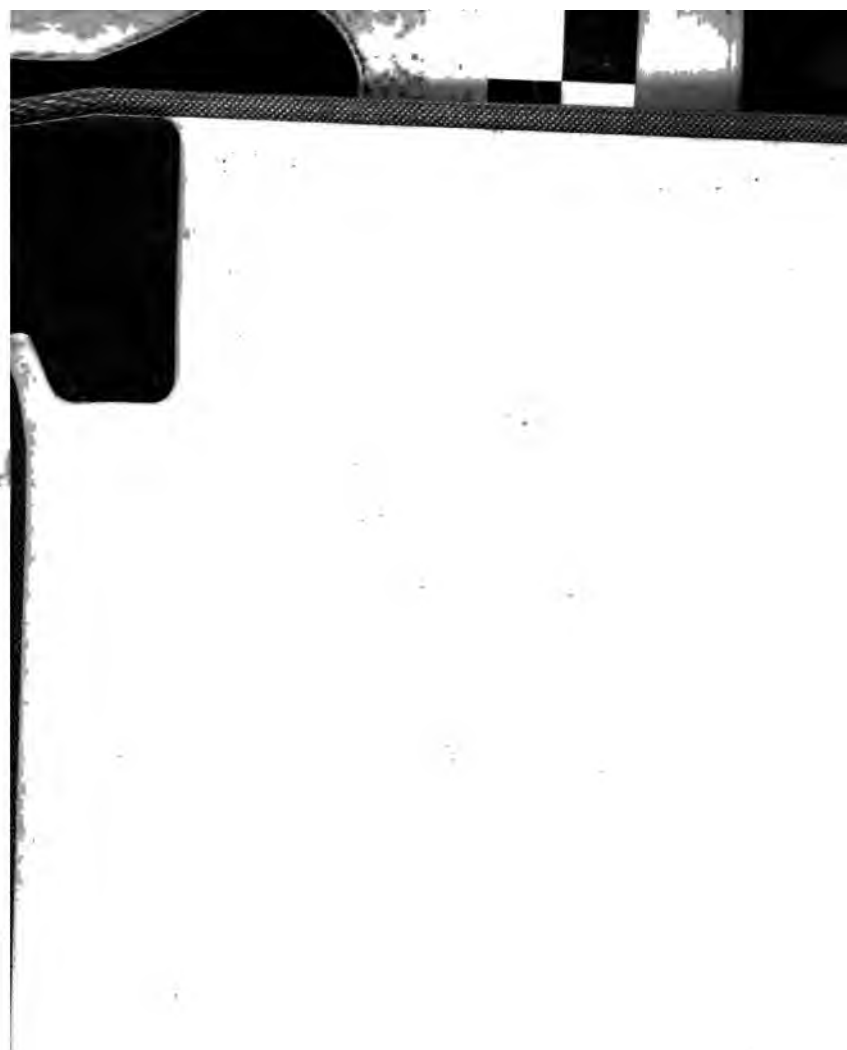
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LOVE
THE CRIMINAL

J. B. Harris-Burland





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BY

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AUTHOR OF

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To
MY FRIEND
E. C. HEATH HOSKEN



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LOVE THE CRIMINAL

CHAPTER I

THE EDGE OF THE QUARRY

TOWARDS the close of a November day a young man emerged from a plantation on the summit of the Stonewold Hills, paused for a moment to light his pipe, and then walked down the hill with his eyes fixed on the valley lying a thousand feet beneath him.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, and his mere bulk and height suggested great physical strength. But John Shil, estate agent to Sir Robert Tankerlane, was even stronger than most men of his size. A clean, wholesome life, lived in the open air, a daily round of hard exercise, a mind that found no attraction in the vices that so often sap the mental and bodily vigour of a man, had fashioned a superb specimen of manhood from the stout material which nature had so generously supplied. His face, tanned with constant exposure to sun and wind, was not remarkable for its beauty, but it was an honest, manly face, and a close student of human nature might have discovered more in it than was apparent to the good folks of Laverstone. They only saw a genial, good-hearted young fellow, who took life easily; but there were depths in John Shil's nature that had not yet been stirred by the circumstances of his simple life.

As he walked down the hill, the sun, a mere dull red globe, sank towards the western horizon, and the mist of a November evening covered all the valley beneath him with a carpet of grey fog. The light still lingered on the upper slopes of the Stonewold Hills, but darkness was creeping up from the plain.

Behind him, on either side of him, before him, as far as the eye could reach, lay the 25,000 acres of the Tankerlane estate. For miles in every direction, every inch of ground, every house, every tree, every stick and stone belonged to Sir Robert Tankerlane. Twelve entire villages, twelve advowsons, more than seventy farms, feudal lordship over nearly four thousand human beings, were all in the hands of one man. A well-known writer, who once spent a summer in a farmhouse on the estate, is reported to have said that the very air belonged to Sir Robert, that the wind seemed to whisper his name in the trees, and that the little brooks, as they babbled over the stones, murmured "Tankerlane, Tankerlane, Tankerlane."

John Shil, as lieutenant of his lord and master, was responsible for the management of the whole of this vast territory. But, as he walked down the slopes and saw the darkness blot out the clustered villages, and broad fields, and wide stretches of woodland, his thoughts were not in any way concerned with the cares of his office. They were centred in one small farmhouse which lay close to the foot of the hill.

This house was the home of Laura Vane, a mere slip of a girl, a negligible item in the population of the Tankerlane estate. But to John Shil she represented all the glory of heaven and earth, for she had promised to be his wife, and he loved her with all the strength of his heart. As yet love was the only passion that had entered into his life. As yet it was all-absorbing—a lord paramount that rode triumphant over his whole nature.

Half-way down the hill the path ran through another large plantation. As the young man passed through the little gate, and entered the shadow of the trees, the grey twilight deepened into almost total darkness. The white, stony path showed like a dim thread in the gloom, and the pattern of the branches overhead stood out against the sky. But John Shil could see little else, and the wood itself was a mere wall of branches on either side of him.

In a few minutes he reached a large open space in the centre of the plantation. The path here ran by the side of a large quarry, from which in the days gone by the Tankerlanes had taken many thousand tons of stone for building purposes. It had not, however, been worked for nearly fifty

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years, and the wood had been planted to conceal the ugly scar it had made on the hill. On one side it sloped gently up to the surface, but on the other there was a sheer drop of eighty feet to the bottom, and the edge was protected by a wooden rail.

As the young man emerged from the darkness into the grey twilight, he heard the sound of footsteps, and a few moments later the tall figure of a man came striding up the hill towards him. The two men met almost in the centre of the clearing.

"Evening, Ben," said John Shil curtly, as the hulking form of one of the farmers on the estate came close to him. He did not like the man, for Ben Holland had an evil reputation in the district, and the brutal ferocity of his temper had marked him out as a dangerous and difficult fellow to deal with. The young agent was also aware that the man hated him with a fierce and undying hatred, for the farmer had been an unsuccessful suitor for the hand of Laura Vane.

The man did not reply to the salutation, and John Shil would have passed on without another word, but Ben Holland stopped, and his huge body blocked up the centre of the pathway. On one side lay the thick undergrowth; on the other side the rail at the edge of the quarry. There was scarcely room for two big men to pass, save by each other's courtesy. John Shil could have pushed by, but, as agent of the Tankerlane property, he had a certain dignity to preserve. He stopped, as though he had something to say to the man who had barred his progress.

"I'd have a word with 'ee," said the man hoarsely; "I'd have a word with 'ee, Mr Shil."

"About that arable?" replied the agent coldly. "It's no use, Ben; Sir Robert has decided not to turn any more arable into pasture."

"Hang the pasture," the man said roughly. "I s'pose you thinks I haven't a mind above turnups and pasture and sich like."

John Shil did not answer. He had never studied the state of Ben Holland's mind, but he knew well enough what was in it at that moment.

"This be a narrow track," the man continued, "and there be no room for two big men like we. One of us must stand aside to let the other pass. Which be it, Mr Shil, you or I?"

The estate agent did not answer. He understood the rude allegory implied in the farmer's words. It was no question of

precedence in a narrow path. It was the hand of the woman they both loved. Yet he could not trust himself to speak. His face was already white with fury, and his great body trembled with the violence of his thoughts. A single word would break through the control he had placed upon himself. He could not trust himself to speak.

"You be a great man in these parts," continued Ben Holland with a sneer, "small wonder you're sich a fav'rite with the gals. There's a lot of power in those white hands o' your'n. I be just a farmer working for my bread. I haven't got nowt to offer; I can't give Sam Vane new fencing and barns and pasture where he want it, nor paint his house, nor be easy in asking for the rent. I can't do nowt of this, Mr Shil, and you've the advantage of the likes of me; but as man to man, I tell 'ee that I've a strong pair of hands."

"If you wish to fight," said John Shil slowly, and with a ghastly attempt at a smile, "I'm afraid I can't oblige you. If you wish to force a quarrel on me, you will, I fear, be unsuccessful. Good night. The path is open to you," and he stepped aside, thrusting the thick undergrowth back with his broad shoulders. But Ben Holland did not pass.

"You be a poor thing, after all, Mr Shil," he said, with a sneer, "for all the great talk I've heard of you. I may be but a farmer, but I'd let no man stand in my path, and I'd step aside for no man either."

"The path is open to you," said John Shil hoarsely. "I do not seek to quarrel with any man."

"No," sneered the farmer, "you'll be getting your own back some other way. You'll not forget to-night, and I'll feel your whip on my back one of these days. I shouldn't wonder if the rent of my farm isn't raised 'fore long. You've the power to deal with better men than yourself. That's how you got the gal. She's for the highest bidder, she is. But there be those that can bid higher than you, Mr Shil."

"Silence, you scoundrel!" cried the young man, no longer able to keep guard over his tongue, "you're not fit to scrape the mud off her boots, and if you dare to——"

"Ah, that touches you up, doesn't it?" the farmer interrupted with a brutal laugh; "another bidder, eh? Mr William Tankerlane'll bid too high for you, John Shil. You'll not want to marry the girl when you know all I know. He's bid already, you fool, and the goods have been knocked down

The Edge of the Quarry

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to him. Soiled goods by now, I warrant, to be passed off as new—ah!"

The man's words came to an end in a cry of rage and pain. John Shil's fist had shot out of the darkness and caught him on the black-bearded jaw. It was a terrible blow, struck with the full strength of a strong man stung to madness.

Ben Holland staggered back, and before he could recover himself, John Shil got in his right hand on the man's heart, and the huge body reeled over on to the fence which bordered the quarry.

There was a crackle of splintering wood, a yell of terror, and then, motionless as a statue, John Shil waited for the sound that he knew must follow—the crash of the heavy body on the bottom of the quarry far beneath.

But there was no sound save the rattle of the stones and pieces of wood that the force of the impact had sent spinning into the depth of the pit.

Then a cry for help rose into the night, piercing, agonising, terrible in its intensity. John Shil sprang forward, and in the grey light he saw two dim hands gripping a tiny bush close to the roots. He saw the bush slowly straining up the meagre soil around it. He saw how little stood between Ben Holland and death. He saw, too, that it would be but the work of a moment to catch hold of the man's wrists, and draw him up into safety. All this he saw, and yet he did not stretch out his hand.

He stood motionless for nearly half a minute. It seemed a hideous eternity, with the shrieks of lost souls ringing in his ears. He watched the roots of the little bush slowly tear themselves out of the soil, and the sight fascinated him. He saw the dim hands shift their position to the soil itself, and he heard the sound of the man's finger-nails on a patch of bare stone. And all the time the devil whispered to him that the man must die. Then, suddenly, as lightning breaks from a dark sky, the blinding truth burst through the clouds of passion and showed him the danger to his soul. With a bitter cry he flung himself forward and stretched out his hands to save his enemy. But he was too late. Even as he moved, the edge of the quarry broke away. He clutched wildly at some fingers, brown with earth and crooked like claws, missed them, and fell on his face, with the gulf beneath his out-stretched arms.

There was a crash on the stones, eighty feet beneath him, and then silence.

For a few moments he lay there, too stunned with horror to move. Then he staggered to his feet, and made his way along the edge of the quarry till he reached the side which slanted gently down to the bottom.

With the aid of a few matches he reached the place where Ben Holland's body lay wedged between two great pieces of yellow limestone. A very brief examination sufficed to tell him that the man was dead. The face was battered out of all recognition. John Shil blew out the match, and was glad to be in the darkness.

CHAPTER II

"GOD SHALL JUDGE"

IN the parlour of the Upper Leaze Farm a young girl sat before a roaring fire of oak logs, and saw bright visions of the future in the flames.

There was no lamp or candle in the room, but the fire, which blazed in a large, open stone hearth, filled the whole apartment with a fierce orange light, in which the shadows danced and swayed unceasingly. The room itself was large and low-ceilinged. The stone floor was partially covered with a faded square of carpet. The walls were panelled to a height of four feet from the ground, and the space above was painted white, and adorned with half a dozen engravings of some merit. The furniture was insufficient for the size of the room, but it was all good. The only ornaments were a few brass candlesticks, an old china bowl, and a Crown Derby tea-service carefully guarded in a glass-covered corner cupboard. The general effect was simple, but pleasing. It was in rare contrast to the majority of "best parlours" to be found in the ordinary farmhouse, and bore evidence to the taste and culture of at least one resident in the house.

This quiet and graceful picture of an English home was crowned and completed by the beauty of the young girl, who was the only occupant of the room. Her thick auburn hair glittered like burnished copper in the light of the flames. Her face, not so perfect in outline as to be devoid of character, was yet of a rare loveliness. It was a strong, noble face, of a type not often found among the women of the present day. It belonged to sterner times, when women were called upon to do great deeds for God or their country, when they died as martyrs at the stake, or faced death amid the blazing ruins of their homes.

Yet there was a wealth of tenderness in the eyes of Laura Vane as she gazed into the firelight and thought of the man to whom she had given her heart. She had no fear for the future. He was a man worthy of a great love, a clean-minded, honourable gentleman, as yet almost a boy in comparison to her own developed character and intellect, but a boy with all the promise of strength to fight the battle of life. Many men, in all ranks of life, had sought the hand of Laura Vane, but morally and mentally John Shil towered head and shoulders above them all. She thanked God that her love had been bestowed on one who was worthy of the love of any woman; for love, like Samson, is both strong and blind, and often wrecks the temple of its own happiness.

Laura Vane had been born in humble circumstances; she was a daughter of the soil, and her childhood had differed in no wise from that of other children in a similar position. But as she grew older, her father, recognising the fact that her young beauty was already attracting attention, and that she was probably destined to a marriage above her station, resolved to spare no expense in her education. From the national school at Laverstone she was sent to a "ladies' college" at Cheltenham, and three years at this desirable establishment worked a great change in external graces and accomplishments. But, at heart, Laura Vane was unchanged, and it says much for her strength of character that she returned to Laverstone with genuine pleasure, and entered into all the details of her home life with heart-felt enthusiasm. She worked from early morning until dusk—the daughter of a simple farmer. Then she changed her clothes—"dressed for dinner," as her father called it—and Sam Vane, a rough old farmer, found his reward for the day's work in gazing at his daughter's beauty and listening to the sound of his daughter's voice.

Such was the girl who had promised to become the wife of John Shil, a woman who would have graced and beautified any position of life to which she might have been called; a strong, beautiful, tender-hearted woman, little dreaming, as she gazed into the fire, and thought of her lover, that she would need all her strength and all her love to support her in the days to come.

Her reveries were broken by a loud knocking at the hall door, and a few moments later there was a sound of footsteps on the stone flags outside, and the ring of a voice that

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quicken the beating of her heart. She rose to her feet and moved forward a pace or two, as John Shil entered the room.

He closed the door behind him, and came unsteadily towards her. A mere glance at his face was sufficient to tell her that something unusual had occurred. It was pale and stern, and there was a look in the eyes that frightened her. They were the eyes of a man who had sinned, and who is afraid of the consequences of his sin. Her greeting died away on her lips, and she held out her hand in silence.

To her surprise he stopped, looked at her hand for a second or two, and then shook his head. As a rule he greeted her with a kiss and an affectionate embrace. Now he stood six feet away from her, and for the moment it seemed as though the whole world lay between them.

"No, Laura, no!" he cried suddenly and fiercely. "Not even your hand—till I have told you. Is your father in?"

"No, Jack," she replied calmly; "he has gone to Brandersham to buy some farm implements. He will not be back until eleven o'clock. What has happened? Come and sit here by the fire and tell me." She spoke quietly, almost soothingly, as a mother might speak to a child. He came forward slowly, and did not look at her, as he flung his great body into an armchair. For a few seconds she looked down at him, half in pity and half in fear. But whatever her feelings were, she let no trace of them be seen by the man who might need her help and sympathy. She sat down on the opposite side of the fireplace. John Shil's face was buried in his hands, and for a few moments neither of them spoke. The woman was the first to break the silence.

"Well, Jack," she said quietly, "what have you to tell me?" A meaner woman would have asked him why he had refused to take her hand, and might even have spoken in a tone of annoyance. But Laura Vane knew well enough that her lover had intended no discourtesy, and that the act was inspired by a high code of honour, rather than by a desire to wound her feelings.

He did not reply to her question, but remained motionless as a statue. She looked at him, and prayed quietly for strength. She knew now that something terrible must have occurred to so crush the strength and courage of the man.

"Come, Jack," she said cheerfully, "cowardice was never one of your faults."

Then he slowly raised his white face from his hands, looked into the eyes of the woman who loved him, found perhaps strength of purpose, and told her all, omitting nothing, concealing nothing, sparing himself and her not a word of the whole truth.

Laura Vane listened to his narrative in silence, with her eyes fixed on the fire. When he had finished, she did not look up from the dancing flames. The whole world swam in a blaze of fierce light.

"Laura," the man cried hoarsely, "look at me, speak to me—forgive me for what I have done. I was blind with passion. I did not intend—I was too late. I did not know what I was doing. I was too late—surely God will forgive me for those few moments, and you—surely you will forgive me, Laura."

"I was not thinking of that," she replied slowly. "I was thinking of what might happen, of whether—the truth will be known. Forgiveness? There is nothing for me to forgive. The blow was struck for me; any honourable man would have struck it; and, as for what followed——" She paused, not knowing how to choose her words, and the face of Ben Holland seemed to leer at her from the heart of the flames.

"And as to what followed?" the man echoed.

She raised her head and looked at him. His pleading eyes were fixed on her, and his face was haggard with the agony of his soul. His strong hands were clasped together, almost in an attitude of prayer.

"And as to what followed," he repeated, "those few moments when I let a man die without stretching out a hand to save him. We must face the truth, Laura, you and I. It is no use shutting our eyes. I murdered Ben Holland."

She rose to her feet with a look of horror on her face. The word murder had not yet passed between them. It was almost too brutal a word for a woman's ears.

"Yes," he cried, springing to his feet and facing her, "that is the truth, and we must face it."

She came close to him, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"God alone is the judge of our thoughts and actions," she said quietly. "But as for myself—see, I do not shrink from you."

Her calm voice, and the look of love on her face, brought fresh hope to the man's heart. He bent down and kissed her reverently on the forehead.

"God Shall Judge"

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"God shall judge me and deal with me as I deserve," he said gravely. "I will put myself into the hands of my fellow-men, and they, too, shall judge."

"No," she cried sharply, as though the words had stung her, "you must not do that. You must keep silence. What has been done has been done. Confession is not atonement. God will judge you, not your fellow-men."

The man stared at her in amazement. He did not understand how such words could fall from the lips of an honourable and high-principled woman. He did not realise that the first natural instinct of a woman is to shield and protect those whom she loves, and that she will do this with her life and even with her honour.

"I would rather confess," he said lamely. "The truth must come to light some day."

"You must not confess," she answered firmly; "you must keep silence—for my sake. You can do no good by confession. God, not your fellow-men, must judge you. Promise me that you will keep silence."

"I promise," he said in a low voice. Then, clasping her in his arms, he kissed her on the lips, and left the room without another word.

And, when he had gone, the woman's calmness and courage broke down under the strain, and she sobbed bitterly in the silence, praying to God that He would be a merciful judge.



CHAPTER III

ON THE ALTAR OF LOVE

FOR more than an hour Laura Vane sat before the fire, aching under the blow that had fallen upon her. Her fine, sensitive nature shrank from the truth. But the sturdy courage she had inherited from a long line of clean-living yeomen gave her the strength to face the situation. Mentally her back was against the wall, and her womanly nature was up in arms to do battle for the man she loved. Excuses for his conduct were ready to her hand, and she flung them one after the other against the stern, immovable fact of his sin.

In argument she was worsted. The truth remained unshaken. John Shil had killed Ben Holland. Yet what woman cares for argument? All her feelings were enlisted on the side of her lover, and she flung defiance in the face of truth. Yet, strange as it may seem, she could not face the judgment of men. Her only fear was that the world might know the facts, and that John Shil might be brought to the bar of human justice.

This battle with her own conscience was interrupted by another knock on the hall door; there was an imperious voice in answer to a woman's protest, and then, a few seconds later, a man flung himself unceremoniously into the room and closed the door behind him.

Laura Vane rose to her feet with flaming cheeks and angry eyes. The man advanced towards her with an air of easy assurance, and held out his hand.

"Good evening, Miss Vane," he said coolly. "Surely you will not refuse the hand of an old friend—of one who wishes, and has always wished, you well." He paused and smiled with the air of a man who holds the best cards in a game of chance.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion, Mr Tankerlane?" she cried, stung for the moment out of her self-possession. "How dare you come here, after—after—— But, thank Heaven, I am not without friends. You shall pay for this insult—this impertinence."

"I am willing to pay anything for the pleasure of seeing you, Laura," he replied. "Every day seems to add a fresh beauty to your loveliness, a fresh charm to your character."

"Are you going to leave the room, Mr Tankerlane," she answered quietly, "or shall I have to ring the bell, and get some of the farm hands to throw you out?"

"I am afraid, Laura," he said politely, "that you would find some difficulty in persuading them to obey your instructions. My father might object."

"Your father," she replied calmly, "is an honourable gentleman, and you——" She did not finish the sentence, but it was effectively completed by the contemptuous look in her eyes.

Yet outwardly William Tankerlane was no mark for the contempt of a woman. He was tall and athletic, and his clean-shaven, handsome face bore the stamp of high birth and a fine intellect. Here was no ordinary young rake, given up to wine and women, but a man who could think and act. Only the lower part of his face betrayed the sensuality of his soul within. The mouth and chin told their own story. They spoke of vice, without the excuse which vice can find in weakness, and of strength, without the sense of morality which alone makes strength a virtue in a man.

He looked at her for a few moments with a faint smile on his lips. Then he walked over to the door, opened it, and looked out into the empty hall. Apparently satisfied with the result of his inspection, he closed the door, and returned to within a few feet of Laura Vane.

"Now look here, Laura," he said quietly, "I have no time for a quarrel; I have come to see you on important business. You are a sensible woman, and must listen to what I have to say to you."

For reply she turned her back on him, and a faint flush came into his lean, hard face. But he came closer to her, and leant over her, so that his chin almost touched her hair.

"Are you going to listen to me, Laura?" he said in a low,

steady voice, "or shall I go straight from this room to the police, and tell them that I saw John Shil murder a man in the Round Plantation this evening?"

She whipped round on him, and sprang back with a white face and terror in her eyes.

"You lie!" she cried fiercely. "It was an accident. You lie, I tell you, you lie! You know it was an accident, you know——" She stopped, seeing the fatal mistake she had made. William Tankerlane smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I see you know all about it," he said. "John Shil has told you his own story. I do not wish to harp on so painful a subject, but as my own narrative will probably differ somewhat from his, I think it is my duty to tell you what actually occurred."

"You may tell me what you please," she replied slowly. "I know the truth."

In a few words, simply, without lie or exaggeration, William Tankerlane told the truth. Save that he spoke as a mere spectator, and that feelings and motives had no part in his story, his account differed in no wise from that which had been given by John Shil.

And, as the girl listened to his calm and judicial narrative, her heart sank within her. She could have met a lie with scorn and contempt. But here was the truth, seen by other eyes, viewed as other men would view it. It was terrible and damning, as told by the lips of William Tankerlane. And he, subtle man that he was, knew that the very strength of his position depended on this strict adherence to the truth.

"Well, Laura," he said, when he had finished his short narrative. "What do you think of it all? I suppose you do not believe me."

"I believe you," she replied quietly. "But I should like to ask you one question. Why did you not come to the rescue of Ben Holland, when he hung between life and death?"

"I might have shared the same fate," he said. "I am but a child in the hands of John Shil."

"Tell me the truth," she exclaimed sharply. "I know well enough that you are not a coward where physical danger is concerned. Why did you not come to the rescue of Ben Holland?"

"Because I love you," he replied, "and because that brutal ruffian insulted you. I was glad to see him die."

She laughed scornfully and looked into his dark eyes.

"Ben Holland's insult," she said, "was small compared to that you offered me two months ago. My good name is nothing to you. Tell me the truth! Tell me why you did not interfere, why you watched, why you——" She stopped and looked steadily into his eyes. Then, as the truth dawned upon her, the fury died from her face and she stood very white and still. The man gazed at her unflinchingly.

"I see," she said slowly, after a long silence. "I understand. John Shil is in your hands, and—you do not love John Shil."

A faint smile crossed Tankerlane's hard face, and then a sudden storm of passion swept across it; a hot flush came into his cheeks, the veins stood out on his forehead, his eyes glowed with a fierce fire. He strode up to the woman and gripped her by the shoulders.

"Laura," he said passionately, "you know that I love you, that I long for you, that I hunger for you as a starving man hungers for bread. And, by Heaven, I mean to have you. Now do you understand why I did not interfere to save Ben Holland's life?"

She did not answer him, but she broke away from the grasp of his fingers, and looked at him as she might have looked at a dangerous beast. Fear, contempt, loathing were all written on her face.

"I have reason to hate John Shil," the man continued, "but my hatred for him is a poor thing compared to my love for you. It is because I love you, and because I intend to make you mine, and because I am ready to sacrifice all scruples to accomplish my desire, that I let John Shil place his liberty, perhaps even his life, in my hands. I have spoken plainly, for the matter requires plain speaking. Do you understand me, Laura?"

"I understand you," she replied, almost in a whisper. "If I do not consent, you will tell what you know. If I do consent, you will be silent."

He nodded, and came towards her with outstretched hands. She did not move, till his face was close to hers. Then she stepped back, and struck him across the mouth with all her strength.

"That is my answer to you," she cried.

William Tankerlane did not speak, nor move from the place on which he stood. He quietly took a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his lips. Then, as he caught sight of the girl's knuckles, and the blood which was trickling down her white hand, he smiled.

"I am afraid you have hurt yourself," he said gently, after a pause.

She turned away from him and pressed her hands to her face. She uttered no sound, but he knew that she was crying. He came to her side.

"Laura," he said tenderly, "I am a clumsy brute. I am afraid I did not make myself clear to you just now. I honour you for the blow you have struck me. It was natural that you should have misunderstood me. Two months ago I—but forget that, Laura. Since then you have taught me how strong a good woman can be. When I spoke to you just now I did not ask you—I did not intend to insult you. I meant that I wished you to be my wife."

The girl turned to him with frightened eyes.

"Your wife?" she repeated mechanically, as though the word had opened up a new train of thought, and she was yet uncertain whither it tended. "Your wife, Mr Tankerlane?"

"My wife," he repeated simply. "It will be an honour for me, and—and I love you, Laura."

She was silent. The whole matter had to be approached from a different standpoint. The man, subtle schemer that he was, had armed himself with a new and powerful weapon. An offer of marriage from the heir of the Tankerlane estates could hardly be treated as an insult. And, if it so happened that a price had to be paid for the life or liberty of the man she loved, this was at least one that could be paid without dishonour.

"Then you mean," she faltered after a long silence; "you mean that, if I refuse to marry you——"

"Precisely, Laura," he replied. "We understand each other."

"I must have time," she said in a low voice—"time to think. Have you thought of the consequences, Mr Tankerlane? Have you thought of what it means to be tied for life to a woman who—who loathes you?"

He winced slightly at her words, but he was a man who cared little for the consequences of his actions.

"I will take the risk," he answered with a smile. "And I will give you till ten o'clock to-morrow morning to decide. Good night."

He held out his hand, but she turned her back on him, and he left the room.

Laura Vane stood alone in the firelight, face to face with the problem of her life.

She had come to the parting of the ways. Two roads lay before her, both steep, perilous, strewn with thorns and sharp stones; both hard to tread and lost in the darkness of futurity, for though she plainly saw the misery and shame that lay at the beginning of her journey, she could not even guess what might be at the end of it.

Yet this much she knew, that whichever path she chose, she must tread it to the end alone.

She sank on her knees before the fire, and stared into the glowing embers, as though she might find some vision of the future in the caverns of red light. The flames had died away from the logs, and only a dull red glow illuminated her beautiful face. Dark shadows lay in the corners of the room, and her own image, gigantic and distorted, was thrown athwart the ceiling like a thunder-cloud.

Laura Vane had come to the parting of the ways, and she could not decide which road to take, yet the decision had to be made within the next few hours. The problem was acute and fraught with many difficulties. The consequences of her decision would be far-reaching, and the ultimate result could not possibly be foreseen.

She did not count herself in the matter. She was prepared to sacrifice all the happiness of her life to save her lover from the consequences of his crime. The long weary years of bondage to a man she disliked, the shame of selling her body for a price, the degradation of mind and soul which must inevitably accompany such a union, all these were nothing compared to the safety of the man she loved. On this one point, at any rate, her mind was clear. If it was best to make the sacrifice, she would make it, and not reckon up the cost she would have to pay.

But the problem before her was more than a question of self-sacrifice. It was not at all clear to her as yet that

her marriage to William Tankerlane would be of any real advantage to John Shil. The matter resolved itself into a choice of evils. On the one hand, her lover would lose his liberty, perhaps even his life, and whether he lived or died, his name would be dishonoured for all time. On the other hand, he would lose the woman he loved, and would stand no cleaner in the eyes of his God.

And she had to decide the problem without help or counsel from any living soul. No other person could know the shame of her secret, and least of all could she seek guidance from the one man to whom a woman turns in the hour of her trial. For John Shil's judgment would be certain and inevitable. He would face the gallows rather than let her do this thing for his sake.

And so Laura Vane was left to decide her fate alone. She was a religious woman, but in this matter God seemed to have gone out of her life. In vain she tried to persuade herself that she ought to obey the dictates of her conscience, and that it was the duty of a Christian woman to serve the cause of truth. In vain she told herself that the man's crime would still stand naked before the eyes of his Maker. She knew well enough the right from the wrong; but in that hour she blinded her eyes, and stopped her ears, and stifled the still small voice that cried out to her. The man she loved was in peril, and that fact blotted out everything else from her mental horizon save the thought that, if she saved him, she must be lost to him for ever.

And then again a more worldly voice whispered in her ear. "Perhaps he will be acquitted. There is but the evidence of one man, and that man an avowed enemy. The blow was struck under great provocation, in defence of a woman's good fame. At the worst there will be a verdict of manslaughter." The voice spoke calmly and logically, but it grew very faint as fear gripped her heart. Even the remote possibility of a conviction was a thing too terrible to contemplate. She knew well enough that innocent men had sometimes been condemned to death, and John Shil was certainly not an innocent man.

She was deaf alike to the voice of conscience and reason, and there only remained a single thought to combat the half-formed resolution in her brain. Would her marriage to William Tankerlane be of real benefit to John Shil, or would

the loss of her be more terrible for him to bear than shame, or degradation, or death itself? These were the questions she asked herself again and again; and she could find no definite answer to them.

The neglected fire burnt down to a heap of grey ashes and half-consumed logs of wood. A few patches of dull red light still glowed in the embers, but the room was almost in total darkness. The shadows on the ceiling had died away, for the whole apartment was itself one deep blur of shadow. Her face was scarcely visible—a mere patch of white against the blackness.

And there in the silence and the darkness a young girl, on the threshold of life, with a great love in her strong, simple heart, and with all the world opening out before her like some gorgeous flower, resolved to sacrifice her mind, her body, perhaps even her very soul, lest harm should come to the man she loved. Such is the love of women, foolish and illogical perhaps, but stronger than death, and set on a height to which no man dare lift his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE COURAGE OF DESPAIR

THE next morning Mr William Tankerlane called and received his answer.

"I have decided to marry you," said the girl quietly. "It is the least of two evils, and I must accept it. Your own common sense will tell you how much happiness is likely to result from such a union—either for me or you."

"I am prepared to take the risk," he replied firmly, "and you know I love you. Do not judge me hardly, Laura; I know that I am driving a hard bargain, but I would do worse things than that to gain you. Do you realise what love means, how it grips the soul, how it fires the mind to madness, how it stifles conscience and drives men to do that which honour forbids them to do? Do you understand that it is an angel with a flaming sword?"

"I understand," she said slowly, "what love means." She spoke very quietly, and there was not even a tinge of passion or bitterness in her voice. Her face was pale, but, save for its exceeding whiteness, it bore no traces of the storm that had wrecked her life. Yet, for all that, both face and voice told William Tankerlane that she knew the true meaning of a great love, and that it was, of very truth, an angel with a flaming sword.

He moved slightly towards her, with passion burning in his eyes, and with outstretched hands, as though he would take her in his arms. But she shrank back from him.

"I will marry you," she repeated coldly, as though discussing a matter of business, "but only on this condition—that the marriage is kept a secret, and that no one, and least of all John Shil, shall know of it until a year after it has taken place."

A sudden gleam came into the man's eyes, and a look of

relief flashed across his face. Both were momentary, and escaped the notice of the girl. She did not know that William Tankerlane, for a very different reason, had been about to make the very same proposition.

"It is a reasonable condition," he answered after a slight pause, "and I will agree to it. I quite understand that you do not wish John Shil to know. I would suggest that we should be married in London."

"Yes, London will do," she said; "and now you must swear to say nothing of what you saw yesterday afternoon in the Round Plantation. Here is a Bible; I know you are not a religious man, but I think you will appreciate the solemnity of the oath."

He took the sacred Book from her hand, pressed his lips to it, and swore the oath, adding as a rider the words, "I swear to do this so long as you agree to live with me."

The girl's white face flushed.

"I did not agree to any such condition," she said sharply.

"No," he replied, "but it is a necessary condition. You might leave me at the church door and refuse to live with me as my wife. That would be a poor reward for my silence."

"Very well," she exclaimed, "let it be so. I will meet you in London in a few weeks' time, if you will fix an hour and a place."

He arranged the hour and the place, and then, fumbling unsteadily in his pockets, he drew out four £5 notes.

"You will want money," he said brusquely.

"I do not want your money," she replied calmly.

He thrust back the notes into his pocket, and held out his hand. She shook her head sadly and turned away from him. She displayed neither anger nor contempt in her refusal to take his hand. It almost seemed as though her spirit had been crushed by the blow that had fallen upon her life. The man was equally calm, and accepted the insult with good grace. But he had conquered, and it is easy for the victor to be gracious.

"They have not yet found the body of Ben Holland," he said, in a low voice, and with these words he left the room.

An hour afterwards Laura Vane had climbed to the summit of the Stonewold Hills. She had ascended by a path which lay to the south of the road in which John Shil had encountered Ben Holland, and had reached a point nearly two miles to the south-west of Laverstone.

Shortly after William Tankerlane's departure, she had fled from her father's home, as from a prison, foul with the

memories of what had passed within its walls. As a rule she worked hard all the morning, but now the course of her life had been changed. In a few hours that life had been snapped into two parts, and the new section of it had been divided from the old by a gulf which could never be crossed. She had sought relief from the shock and crash of the disaster in sheer physical exercise. She had climbed a thousand feet without pause, and now, flushed and panting with exertion, she stood with her back against a gate, and looked out across the valley of the Steyne.

It was a bright, sunny morning, and all the wide panorama beneath her sparkled with light. The breath of frost was in the air, and the white kiss of it still lingered on the trees and grass which the sun had not yet reached. A faint mist, drawn out of the ground by the warmth, hung over the more distant parts of the scene, and the great base of the hills which bounded the far side of the valley were invisible. Only their summits stood out clear in the sunlight, like islands in a sea of vapour.

The little village of Laverstone, grey and quiet, nestled among the bare trees at the foot of the hills. The smoke from the chimneys rose in straight, thin blue lines into the still atmosphere. It was a peaceful scene, a perfect picture of the quiet content of country life. But Laura Vane found no peace in the contemplation of it. For in the last twenty-four hours she had learnt that the quiet village, set under the clear sky, may hold the elements of as grim a tragedy as was ever enacted in the seething darkness of a great city, and that, wherever men and women congregate, there are lust and cruelty and shame.

Her meditations were interrupted by the distant beat of a horse's hoofs on the hard ground. A few minutes later a rider appeared around a bend in the bridle path. She saw at a glance that it was John Shil, and that he was riding furiously.

He drew rein on the other side of the gate and flung himself from his horse. The animal's jaws were white with foam, and the man himself was sweating profusely; but in spite of his exertion his face was very pale. It seemed to Laura Vane that he had aged in the night.

"I called at your house," he said hurriedly; "they told me you had gone for a walk into the hills. I followed you here, for I knew you would not go up by the other path. I

have been thinking things over in the night; I have much to say to you."

"I, too, have been thinking things over in the night," the girl replied slowly.

"I must leave here," he continued breathlessly, "but not at once—that would arouse suspicion—but as soon as possible. I can get work elsewhere. I have some money saved up. I must leave; the place is like a prison to me. They have just brought in the body of Ben Holland. I passed them in the street; I had to stop and ask what had happened. They showed me his face; the eyes were still open, the look in them—oh, God, I cannot stay here, I must go. You must see that I must go."

"Yes," she replied, averting her face, "I think it will be best for you to go."

"I can start life elsewhere," he said fiercely, "in a new country perhaps. But I cannot breathe the air of this place. I wished to tell you this at once, and to ask if you will marry me within the next month, unless—unless anything should happen at the inquest to-morrow."

She was silent, and looking out across the valley of the Steyne, she prayed silently for strength to carry out her purpose.

"Will you marry me, Laura?" he repeated, laying his hand on her shoulder. "You know what I am. I have told you all. You did not shrink from me then. You spoke brave words of comfort. I thought that perhaps you had forgiven me, and that—Laura, for God's sake answer me!"

But still the woman was silent. She had not the courage to speak the words that would have to be spoken; to tell the lie that would have to be told.

"Laura," he cried, "you do not mean—you cannot mean that." He gripped her hard by the shoulders with both hands, and turned her face to his. She closed her eyes with a little moan of pain and would have fallen to the ground but for the strong fingers of the man who held her. But he could read the answer in her white face.

"Laura," he said gravely, "do you mean that you refuse to marry me?"

She opened her eyes and he knew the truth. He took his hands from her shoulders and looked away from her. There were deep lines about his mouth, and his face was no longer the face of a boy.

And then the woman found the strength to speak.

"I cannot marry you, Jack," she said slowly. "It would be impossible after what has happened. This thing would always lie between us. I have been thinking over many things in the night. I have decided that I can never marry you. It will be best for both of us to part, and part for ever."

"Do you mean," he cried hoarsely, "that you do not love me because of—of this?"

"I still love you, Jack," she replied. "I shall always love you, but our ways must lie apart. A great shadow has fallen on our lives, and I shall be in the darkness as well as you."

For answer he reached out his hand to open the gate so that he could pass through and come to her side; but she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Do not come this side of the gate," she said. "Do not make the parting harder for me."

He dropped his hand from the latch and laughed bitterly.

"This gate, then," he said with a ghastly smile, "is the symbol of the life that is to be. But I could break it down; I could wrench it from its hinges and splinter it, and reach your side. Laura, tell me what is this barrier between us, and why, if you still love me, you will not marry me?"

"I have told you," she replied. "Can you not understand? You have made our marriage impossible. There is nothing in my heart but love and pity for you. Yet if I married you, this secret, shared by us two—by us two alone—would divide us so surely, so completely, that life would be hell to both of us. Good-bye, my dear lover!"

She held out her hands to him, and he pressed his lips to them. Then the madness of a great passion seized him. He loosed her fingers, and, gripping the gate with both his hands, he exerted his enormous strength and literally tore the wood-work away from its iron hinges. It came apart with a loud crack of splintering wood, and he flung the fragments far from him on to the grass. The whole action was instantaneous, brutal, terrible to witness. Before the girl could move from the spot on which she stood, he had clasped her in his arms and was covering her face with passionate kisses.

"You are mine," he cried hoarsely, "and I will hold you against all the world—ay, in spite of yourself, in the face of every obstacle. You love me, and I will do anything to make you my wife. I will break down all barriers as I broke this

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gate. I will suffer anything. I will risk anything. You are mine, Laura—till death."

The girl trembled in his arms, but her courage was great in the hour of her temptation.

"I have said that I will not marry you," she replied softly, "and nothing you can say or do will force me to go back on my word."

"Nothing?" he asked, straining her to him in his powerful arms. "Are you sure, Laura?"

"I am sure," she replied quietly. "I am quite, quite sure, Jack."

He let go of her, and striding away a few paces, came back to her side.

"If your decision is final," he said in a hard voice, "my life is nothing to me. I am yours, and if you cast me away from you, I am nothing. I will, therefore, act the part of an honourable man and make peace with my own conscience. To-morrow at the inquest which is to be held on Holland's body, I shall speak the truth. I shall tell the jury what happened, and leave them to judge whether I am a murderer. Do you understand me, Laura?"

"I understand you," she replied. "You are using this as a threat. You think that by this means you will turn me from my purpose. But you are mistaken, Jack. I will only tell you that you have fallen in my estimation. You know how much your life—your happiness means to me, and, knowing this, you use your knowledge to achieve your own desires."

He was silent and bowed his head.

"Jack," she said softly, "you are still the loyal, true-hearted Jack whom I promised to marry so short a time ago?"

He raised his eyes to hers, and his cheek flushed with shame. Then he took hold of her hand, very tenderly, and raised it to his lips.

"Forgive me," he said gently, "forgive me, my own dear sweetheart. I am always your loyal lover. I will serve without questioning. Good-bye, dear heart!"

"Good-bye," she answered, "and God bless you!"

For a few moments he held her hand to his lips. Then he dropped it, turned suddenly on his heel, sprang into the saddle and dug the spurs into the horse's side.

The animal sprang forward, stumbled, regained its feet, and in a few moments both horse and rider had disappeared from sight.



CHAPTER V

THE WOLF AND THE CUR

THAT same afternoon the bite of the frost vanished from the air, and a soft sou'-westerly wind began to hurry up a battalion of dark clouds from the fastnesses of the Welsh mountains. By five o'clock in the evening the wind had increased to half a gale, and the rain came sluicing down on the Stonewold Hills. The gutters in the rough, stony roads became streams of water, and, at the foot of the hill, the village brook roared through the single street like an Alpine torrent fed with melting snow.

Few people were abroad that night ; but William Tankerlane, who had sought relief from the mental strain of his interview with Laura Vane in a long ride round his father's estate, was returning home down the very road where John Shil had encountered Ben Holland the day before.

As he neared the Round Plantation, he emerged from the shelter of a high bank, and encountered the full violence of the storm. Both steed and rider staggered as the wind struck them, and the rain lashed them like a whip. The horse became nervous, and stumbled more than once on the wet, loose stones in the path. It was so dark that Tankerlane could hardly see his hand before his face, and when he reached the gate of the plantation and alighted to open it, he decided to lead his horse through the wood until they reached the broader and smoother road beyond it. He remembered the quarry with the broken rail.

He moved slowly and cautiously along the path with one hand on the reins. The trees afforded some shelter from the wind, but showers of water came from their branches as he brushed against them, and he was drenched to the skin.

Then suddenly the horse stopped, and no persuasion on the

part of his master could induce him to budge an inch. Threats, soft words, blows were all of no avail. The animal might have been turned into an image of stone.

Tankerlane knew the ways of horses well, but in this case he could not tell whether the beast had stopped from sheer obstinacy, or from fright, or from that instinct for unseen danger which belongs to so many of the members of the animal kingdom. He let go of the reins, and tried to light a match, but the wind was too strong. There was a momentary flare and splutter, and before he could see anything of his surroundings, he was again enveloped in darkness.

He stretched out both his hands. On one side he felt the wet bushes; on the other he touched nothing. He moved away from the wood cautiously, step by step, holding his hands before him. When he had taken three steps, his fingers came into contact with a wooden rail. And then he knew where he was.

Tankerlane was not a superstitious man, but he shivered as he felt the damp wood beneath his touch. Slowly he moved down the hill with his hand on the rail until he came to the end of it. Then he retraced his steps, and walked up the steep path till he came to a jagged and splintered piece of timber. Beyond that there was empty space. He stretched out his hand, and, moving towards the wood, touched the cold muzzle of the horse. The animal had stopped exactly opposite the place where Ben Holland had gone down to his death.

He laughed aloud, as though at his own fears. He at any rate had not sent the wretched man to his doom, and had no reason to shun the spot. Then, as he stood there in the darkness, with the wind roaring over his head, he remembered that he had let the man die to serve his own purpose, and that the victory he had won that very morning had been gained by another's crime. He caught hold of the reins once more, and tried to drag his horse down the slope. But the animal still refused to move.

He decided to leave it, and make the rest of the journey on foot, at the same time resolving to get even with the horse the next time he was astride of it. He knew well enough that if he got into the saddle at that moment, he could overcome the animal's fear or obstinacy. But few men would have cared to undertake such a task in the darkness. The narrow path and the precipice which bounded it on one side were enough to give

pause to the boldest rider. A slip, a stumble, a sudden swerve at the touch of the spur, would perhaps mean death. He gave the animal three stinging blows with the whip, and, letting go the reins, walked down the hill.

Before he had gone more than fifty yards, however, he caught sight of a faint gleam of light among the trees. It disappeared almost instantly.

"Poachers," said Tankerlane to himself. He stopped and listened. There was the sound of someone moving in the undergrowth, and the noise came nearer and nearer to him. It was quite evident that the man, whoever he was, had no wish to avoid him, or else was ignorant of his presence.

In a few moments someone came crashing out of the bushes, and stumbled into his very arms with a cry of terror. Tankerlane gripped him by the collar. The fellow was small and helpless in his powerful grasp. But it was possible that he had a knife about him.

"Poaching, eh!" said Tankerlane, swinging the man off his feet, and forcing him face downwards on to the ground. Something tinkled on the stones.

"Poachin'?" the man spluttered. "No, swelp me bob, guv'nor. Oi tell yer strite, guv'nor, oi'm an honest man. Leave go, yer chokin' me. Can't a pore, 'ard-working feller tike shelter from the bloomin' rain? Leave go, I say," and he squirmed and struggled helplessly in the mud.

Tankerlane knew at once from the man's accent that he was not a native of those parts. Then he caught sight of a tiny yellow gleam on the ground—a mere speck of light in the darkness. He stretched out his left hand and touched the hot metal of a small lantern. He picked it up by the handle, and, thrusting it into the man's hand, hauled him to his feet.

"A dark lantern, eh?" he exclaimed. "Turn the light on and let us see who you are. I am the owner of these woods, and you have no business in them at this time of night."

"I tike my oath, guv'nor," the man whined.

"Turn on the light," Tankerlane said sternly. "I shan't hurt you, and I'll give you a job and half a sovereign if you'll do it."

The man turned round the slide of the lantern and a shaft of yellow light streamed out into the darkness. It fell on Tankerlane's face and a small, circular patch of wet bushes

and sparkling raindrops. Tankerlane took the lantern from the man's hand and examined his prisoner.

The fellow was a thin, undersized specimen of a man, and he presented a miserable appearance as he stood shivering in his ragged and soaking clothes. His face was pale and ugly, and covered with a three weeks' growth of dirty yellow hair. His small, bloodshot eyes blinked nervously in the light. His whole aspect was that of a man caught in the act of committing a felony. Tankerlane noticed a piece of thin wire sticking out from one of the torn pockets.

"A snare, eh?" he said. "Well, it doesn't matter. I've a horse here just behind me. The devil won't move—frightened of something. I'll give you half a sovereign if you'll stand by him till I send a groom up from the Court."

The man did not answer, but his teeth chattered as he looked nervously behind Tankerlane into the darkness.

"Well, you scoundrel?" said Tankerlane, giving him a shake to quicken his powers of speech.

"Mike it a quid, guv'nor," the man whined.

"Be hanged to you," replied Tankerlane. "You may think yourself lucky I'm not giving you over to the police."

"The 'orse stopped, did 'e?" said the man. "Oh, the 'orse stopped. The blessed hanimal, 'e seed mor'n we 'uman beings; 'e stopped there, by the rile, the broken rile. Oh, 'e stopped, did 'e, and you arsk me to stay there for 'arf a thick 'un, there, where the bloomin' 'orse seed 'im."

"What are you drivelling about, you idiot?" said Tankerlane sternly. "If you don't go and stand by that horse, I'll take you down to the police station."

The man cringed and cowered before Tankerlane's angry voice.

"It's worf a quid, guv'nor," he repeated with chattering teeth; "if you knew what I knows about that 'ere bloomin' rile, you'd mike it a quid."

"Don't be a fool," replied Tankerlane firmly. But his words belied his feelings. Fear came to him out of the darkness and laid her cold hands upon his heart. Perhaps the man's terror was infectious. Perhaps William Tankerlane was afraid of something more tangible than the ghost of a dead man.

"And what do you know about the rail," he continued, "that I do not know, that everyone does not know? Ben

Holland, half drunk, fell against it last night, and it broke away with his weight. We all know that. But only a miserable, whining hound like yourself would be afraid to wait half an hour by the place where a man met with an accident."

"An haccident, guv'nor," said the trembling wretch with a sickly grin. "What'd yer say, if it were no bloomin' haccident, after all?"

A look of fear came into Tankerlane's dark eyes, but his face was in the shadow, and the poacher saw nothing.

"I should say," replied Tankerlane, "that you had probably been drinking. But you had better explain yourself, and be quick about it—unless you want to spend the night in the village lock-up."

"Look 'ere," said the man, "yer a big man, and mebbe I'm a mean little cur, but my motto is, 'Allus mike friends with the little 'uns.' They can bite, guv'nor."

"You'll find the big ones can kick, if you don't get to the point."

"The point is," said the man, "that I knows yer, and I knows yer 'ate a gentleman called Mr Shil like pizen. And I knows yer'd give me a trifle if I could make things unpleasant for that same Mr Shil. That's what I knows, but what I wants to know is 'ow much."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," said Tankerlane, "but you'd better explain," and he shook the little man savagely, as though he would choke the life out of him.

"'Ere, 'ere, guv'nor," the fellow gasped. "Leave go, I say, leave go."

"It'll warm you up," replied Tankerlane brutally; "but now then—speak out and speak the truth, or I'll find a way to make you."

"'Ow much?" spluttered the man. "'Ow much'll you give me, if I go down to the hinqwest to-morrow and speak the troof?"

"What is the truth?" Tankerlane asked quietly. But he knew well enough, and cursed the fate that had put his secret in another's hands. The man did not answer.

"Look here, my fellow," said Tankerlane abruptly, "I've had enough of this nonsense. I'm going to take you down to the village," and he commenced to drag the man down the steep path by the scruff of his neck.

"I'll speak, guv'nor; I'll speak."

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"Well," asked Tankerlane, loosening his grip on the man's collar.

"It's like this, guv'nor, I'm a pore man, and what I knows is worf money to you. But you're a gen'leman, and you'll see as a pore man don't lose nothing by bein' an honest man, and tellin' the troof, the gawspel troof, mind you."

"Get to the point."

"Well," said the man in a low voice, "I was 'ere last evenin' a settin' of a snare and I seed Mr 'Olland go over the cliff and I seed 'oo knocked 'im over and I seed 'oo let 'im 'ang there wivout liftin' an 'and to saive 'im. And if that ain't murder, my naime ain't 'Enry Blurton."

"You saw this?" queried Tankerlane in a tone of well-simulated surprise and horror, "and yet you did not come to the man's assistance. You heard him call for help, and yet——"

"I didn't say 'e called for 'elp, guv'nor," said the man with a sharp look in his little eyes. Tankerlane bit his lip, and was glad that his face was in the darkness.

"I suppose he did call for help," he replied, "if he was, as you say, hanging over the edge." He wondered how much the fellow knew. The wood was traversed by many narrow paths. He himself had watched the tragedy from one of these at a point close to where it joined the one leading past the quarry. He had entered the wood from the north side, and had quietly retraced his steps, unseen by John Shil. It was necessary to find out at once where this other spectator had concealed himself.

"Tell me your story," he said, after a short pause, "it may be worth money to you." He loosened his grip on the man's collar. It was not likely that he would try to escape while there was a chance of making money.

The man told his narrative, and it agreed substantially with what Tankerlane knew to be the facts. It was also clear that the scene had been witnessed from the other side of the road, and that therefore it was extremely improbable that Blurton had seen the second spectator of the crime. This supposition was supported by the fact that Tankerlane had not seen Blurton. So far, at any rate, Tankerlane was in the position of advantage. He quickly decided on a course of action. He knew that it would cost him something, but money was not to be reckoned against the loss of Laura Vane.

"I believe your story," he said after a momentary pause. "But will you explain why you did not at once go to the police?"

The man's ugly face puckered up in an evil smile. "I'm a pore man, guv'nor," he replied, "and it ain't often sich a bit of fat comes to a pore man. I sez to myself, now 'ere's one man as'll pay for me to keep my mouf shut, and 'ere's anover as'll pay for me to open it wide. Between the two poor 'Enery oughter mike a bit."

"You blackguard," said Tankerlane. He spoke with feeling. He had acted in a precisely similar way, and for precisely a similar reason—his own advantage. But he flattered himself that money was a more sordid end than love. He did not see that the miserable half-starved tramp and the prosperous William Tankerlane were both equally guilty in the eyes of God.

The man did not seem annoyed at the words, which, after all, had probably been dinned into his ears from earliest childhood. He grinned as though a compliment had been paid to his perspicacity.

"Well, 'ow much, guv'nor?" he growled. "It's worf a bit to you for me to go down to the hinquest to-morrow and speak the troof."

"It would be worth a lot to me," Tankerlane replied, "but I shall not pay you a farthing. It would be useless for me to expect you to understand the feelings of a gentleman in matters of this sort, but you may take it from me that no man of honour would use such a weapon against his rival or try to wreck the happiness of the woman he loved by sending her lover to the gallows." He spoke with simple nobility, and his words had the ring of truth in them. His face was hidden in the darkness, and Henry Blurton could not see the mocking smile that played about his lips. The poacher gaped at him with wide open mouth and startled eyes. He had not reckoned on this view of the matter. Tankerlane's attitude of mind was incomprehensible to him.

"Gor blime," he ejaculated, after a pause, "you're a fine plucked 'un," and then his sides shook with silent laughter.

"As I said," Tankerlane continued, "I could not expect you to understand the feelings of a gentleman. Miss Vane is in love with Mr Shil, and she is going to—to marry him. I can take defeat like a man. Her happiness is more to me

than anything else in the world. If this story becomes public property, her heart will be broken. Now, perhaps, you can see why I will not pay you a farthing for your information."

He spoke eloquently, and the part he had assumed suited him well. It was almost a pity that his whole audience consisted of a man degraded almost to the level of an animal, and absolutely incapable of appreciating this fine sense of honour. Henry Blurton, however, did appreciate one point in the situation, and his cunning little eyes twinkled. He was not quite sure whether Tankerlane was speaking his mind, or attempting a gigantic bluff to avoid purchasing his information. But he foresaw profit to himself in either case.

"I hadmires yer sentiments, guv'nor," he said with husky emotion, "though they're a bit above a pore feller like yer 'umble servant. Yer love for this 'ere gal does yer credit, and what I sez now is this, what'll yer pay me to keep my bloomin' mouf shut?"

Tankerlane smiled under cover of the darkness. He had expected and desired this demand, and had led up to it by his conversation. The money would be well laid out and bear good interest, to accumulate for use at some future date.

"You seem to be a scoundrel of some resource," he replied. "I am, however, anxious to save a lady from lifelong misery, and I will pay you £100 a year to keep your mouth shut. This sum will be paid to you monthly at any address you like to furnish. If you make any further attempt at blackmail, the payments will cease."

"Mike it——" the man began, but stopped, as Tankerlane caught him by the arm.

"That is the offer," Tankerlane said savagely; "you can take it or leave it. I'm not going to haggle with you."

"Very well, guv'nor," the man replied. "I'll tike it, and so long as I get paid, I'll hold my tongue."

"Exactly. We understand each other. If you speak, the allowance will be stopped. If, on the other hand, I stop the allowance, you will speak."

"Jest so, guv'nor, and a trifle in advance, if I might be so bold as to arsk for it. I ain't tasted food since last night."

Tankerlane took three sovereigns from his pocket, and the man's eyes glistened at the sight of the gold.

"You come from London," said Tankerlane. "Get back there at once — to-morrow morning, if you can manage it."

The balance of the month's money shall be sent to you in three days' time. What address will find you?"

"Twenty-three St Stephen's Buildings, Stepney," the man replied, clutching the sovereigns tightly in his hand. "That'll find me."

Tankerlane wrote the address on the back of an envelope.

"Well, stop here with the horse," he said, "till I send my groom up. Then find some shelter for the night in our stables. But don't let me find you in Laverstone after midday to-morrow. Here's your lantern. Good night."

"Good night, guv'nor," the man replied, looking at his face, now seen for the first time in the light of the lantern. "I'll act square by you—so long as I'm paid for it."

William Tankerlane turned on his heel, and disappeared out of the circle of yellow light. The man looked after him and then slouched up to the horse.

"H'm!" he said to himself, as Tankerlane's footsteps died away down the hill. "I wonder what 'e's up ter. 'E ain't got sich a ginrous face, after all. But pore 'Enry 'as fallen on 'is feet at last."

CHAPTER VI

THE LIE

THE inquest on Ben Holland was held on the following day at three o'clock in the afternoon.

The doctor certified that the unfortunate man had broken his neck, and that a fall from such a height would, in nine cases out of ten, result in death.

There was no reason to suppose that the fall was the result of anything but an accident. Evidence was forthcoming that Ben Holland was the worse for drink when he left the Blue Boar at the foot of the village. He was a big man, and his weight alone was quite sufficient to break a fence that was not altogether so sound as it might have been. It was easy for a man to slip, and especially for a man who was not quite sober.

An examination of the path close to the broken rail had disclosed no signs of a struggle. But the ground by the edge of the quarry had a story of its own to tell. The uprooted plant, the turf grooved and scarred with marks of finger-nails, the scratches on the stone itself, all pointed to the fact that the wretched man had struggled for life on the very brink of the precipice.

Then John Shil was summoned as a witness. It was known that he had returned to Laverstone from the hills an hour after Ben Holland had left the village. A previous witness had deposed to having met him on the far side of the hill, on the road which would take him through the Round Plantation. It was hardly credible that he had encountered Holland, or else he would have come forward of his own accord as a witness. As it was, the coroner only sent for him after hearing the other evidence.

The young agent entered the room with a quiet air of self-

possession ; and though all eyes were turned on him, he did not appear to be in the least embarrassed by the interest he aroused.

Yet he had come there with a ready lie on his lips, and was glad that the room was ill-lighted.

At the inquest on Ben Holland, John Shil gave his evidence calmly and without hesitation. He expressed no surprise at the coroner's summons, but he said that he would have come of his own accord, if he had been able to throw any light on the unfortunate occurrence.

"Yes," he replied in answer to a question. "It is perfectly true that I returned from Snowland to Laverstone that very afternoon, and I should probably have met Ben Holland if I had passed through the Round Plantation ; as a matter of fact, however, when I reached the gate of the plantation I remembered that Mr Harpit had written to me two days previously about one of his gates. Is that not so, Mr Harpit ?"

"That be so, sir," replied a sturdy, red-bearded farmer, who was serving on the jury, "about them bars, and the sheep agettin' through, and hurtin' of themselves."

"So, instead of going through the plantation," Shil continued, "I came round the side of it, looked at the gate in question, and joined the road again at the bottom of the wood."

"And you heard nothing ?"

"I heard nothing," he replied.

Further questions followed, and there was a discussion about times, rates of walking, with the view of discovering whether Ben Holland was actually in the plantation while John Shil was proceeding round the edge of it. The agent answered the questions politely, but his answers threw no further light on the matter.

"Thank you, Mr Shil," said the coroner, when the discussion had died away. "I am sorry we have been obliged to trouble you. I don't think we need detain you any longer."

The agent bowed stiffly. His outward demeanour was calm, unnaturally calm in the eyes of those who knew him. Ben Holland had few friends in Laverstone, but for all that he was one of the little circle of village life. He had been born, and had lived and had died in the quiet hamlet at the foot of the Stonewold Hills. It was almost impossible for those who had known him all his life to think of his death without

emotion. But John Shil was as cool and collected as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. There was not even a tremor in his voice.

Yet, if the rough farmers and labourers could have seen into his mind, and pierced the veil of his outward composure, they would have shrunk back in horror from the hellish tumult of his thoughts. Every moment that he spent in the room was agony to him, and more than once he nearly broke down under the strain. His own shame was made brutally clear to him by the courteous questions of the coroner.

"You are a murderer, and are forced to lie to save yourself from the consequences of your crime."

The words rang in his ears, as though they had been shouted out by someone in the room. They came to him again and again, and once, muffled, as though spoken by the thing that lay so still under the white sheet in the next room, and yet once more in the tones of his mother's voice, a voice that he had not heard for more than ten years.

Fear alone could not have supported him in the hour of trial. The shame and bitterness of the scene were so intense that more than once he could scarcely restrain himself from making an open confession of the truth. For it must be remembered that John Shil was a man who had lived an upright and honourable life, a man to whom the very thought of a lie was a degradation. The crime itself was less sinful in his eyes than the open lie that concealed it. The crime had been committed in a moment; looked at in a favourable light, it was but the result of a few seconds' hesitation, repented of too late. But the lie was premeditated and spoken with due appreciation of its foulness. It was an endorsement of the crime written when the heat of passion had died away.

Yet John Shil would never have lied to save his own life, and, to do the man justice, it was certain that but for the pleadings of Laura Vane he would have made an open confession several hours before the inquest. He had lied for the love of a woman, to save her from life-long agony, and it was this thought alone that gave him strength to go through the ordeal at the inquest, and restrain the impulse that again and again so nearly drove him to make confession of the truth.

He passed out of the stuffy room into the street. It was nearly dark, and he allowed the mask to fall from his face as he walked sharply through the village. His own house was in

the park of Tankerlane Court, and was more than a mile away from Laverstone.

The quick walk through the keen air restored his mind to a more even balance, and by the time he reached Park Lodge he was convinced that after all he had acted for the best. The ordeal had been a cruel one, but it was over and done with. Ben Holland would be buried and the incident forgotten.

Yet, as he sat in his smoking-room before the fire that night, he realised all the darkness of his future, a life without the woman he loved, a life for ever stained by the memory of those few moments in the Round Plantation, a life that held out nothing, save the possibility of making some atonement for the past.

And in another room, a mile away, the woman, for whose sake he had lied, was thinking only of his happiness, and already making the arrangements for her sacrifice.

Love was in both their hearts, a love so strong, that the man had sacrificed his honour and the woman her self-respect for the sake of it. It was for love that the man had lied, and for love that the woman had promised herself as a price of silence. Truly might it have been said of both of them: "Oh love, how many sins have been committed in thy name."

And all the time Fate, grim and inexorable, had no pity and no thought for the sacrifices they had made. For Fate moves in accordance with the law, and the law is this—that the wages of sin is death.

And yet God Himself is Love.

CHAPTER VII

"GOOD-BYE TO HOPE, GOOD-BYE, GOOD-BYE"

DURING the next month events moved rapidly in the quiet little village of Laverstone.

William Tankerlane left for London shortly after the inquest. His departure excited no comment, as he spent a good deal of his time away from his father's house.

A week afterwards John Shil resigned his post as land agent to Sir Robert Tankerlane. His resignation formed a topic for conversation throughout the villages on the estate, and was discussed every evening in all the public-houses in the district. It was a sincere source of annoyance to Sir Robert, who had a genuine liking for the young man, and who doubted if his successor would act so thoroughly as a buffer between him and his tenants. He offered to raise the agent's salary, but John Shil was firm. He made no secret about the reason for his departure.

"You know, Sir Robert," he said, in answer to the baronet's protestations, "that my engagement to Miss Vane has been broken off. It is impossible for me to remain where I am likely to meet and see her every day. I am sorry, but I must go elsewhere."

"Drat the women," said the baronet fiercely, "I've no patience with 'em. Stay here, my boy, and get her to change her mind, or I'll turn old Vane out of the farm, and they can clear off the estate."

"That would be rather hard on them, Sir Robert," Shil replied with a smile. "After all, Miss Vane has a perfect right to change her mind. No, I will go; I know a man that will just suit you, a more able man than I am."

"I thought you were made of sterner stuff, Shil," said Sir

Robert; "I didn't think you were the fellow to turn tail at a woman's words."

"I have made up my mind, and I shan't change it."

"Then I won't waste my breath, but I am very sorry. When do you want to go?"

"At once, next week if possible. I can wire to Danby to-day. He will come down to-morrow, and I can put him in the way of things. He's been at the business for years, and is a good fellow, a son of Sir Harry Danby. I daresay you know his father, Danby of Trencourt."

"He was at Eton with me, I think," said Sir Robert; "but what about yourself, Shil? Have you anything in view?"

"Nothing at present. But I can wait, and if you'll give me a testimonial——"

"I can do better than that," interrupted the baronet. "An old friend of mine, Lord Crawcour, is on the look-out for a new agent. His present man is robbing him left and right. Twenty thousand acres in Essex, easy land to ride over, flat as this table, and a bit of a change for you. If you like, I'll write to him."

"I am greatly obliged to you," Shil replied quietly. "I will go and see him at once."

"Right you are—one good turn deserves another. If I am half as pleased with your friend, as I expect Lord Crawcour to be with you, I shall be satisfied."

And so it came to pass that John Shil obtained the post of agent to one of the greatest landowners in the East of England, and left Laverstone with the intention of never setting foot in it again. Before he left, however, he claimed a final interview with Laura Vane, and it was granted to him. They had studiously avoided each other since their parting on the day before the inquest. Now, however, the separation was to be final. John Shil was going to a distant part of England, and it was probable that they would not meet again.

"Laura," he said, as he entered the parlour of her father's house, and closed the door behind him, "Laura, to-morrow I am going into Essex. I have come, as you know, to say good-bye to you. A few weeks ago I thought that nothing would separate us but death. But a wall has risen between us, and it is the work of my own hands. Can nothing break it down; can neither my love nor yours prevail? Is there not some way out of this?"

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"There is no way out of this," she replied slowly; "we must travel by the path I have chosen—you on yours, and I on mine. They will not meet in this world; perhaps—after death."

"Laura," he cried, seizing her in his arms, and crushing her to his breast, "come with me into Essex; there is a home waiting for you there. Forget all I have done. You love me; cannot love make you forget?"

"I cannot forget," she replied.

"See what I have done for you," he cried passionately. "I tell you I have sunk into the lowest depths of shame. The other day, at the inquest, I lied because of my love for you. Conscience, honour, even prudence, cried out on me to speak the truth. But I lied because I remembered your words, and that lie will be fastened on me for all eternity. Have you nothing to give me in return for all I have lost?"

"I have nothing to give," she answered in a voice so low that he could scarcely hear it. She did not speak of what she had already given; she breathed not a word of her own great sacrifice.

"You do not love me," he cried; "of course you do not love me, else nothing could stand between us. This shadow, what is it? A frail, uncertain cloud that would scatter at the breath of love. No, you do not love me; you cannot hide from me the truth, Laura. You alone know me for what I am, and because you know this, you have thrust me out of your heart."

For answer she raised her head and looked into his burning eyes with so pure and sweet a glance that he was shamed into silence. He kissed her gently on the lips, and, freeing her from his clasp, walked over to the fireplace and buried his face in his hands.

She stood for a moment looking at him with infinite pity and infinite tenderness in her eyes, then she crossed quietly to his side and laid one hand on his arm.

"Jack," she said softly, "my own dear lover, both now and through all the weary days to come."

"I cannot bear it," he cried fiercely; "do not call me your lover. Let me think that you do not love me; it will be easier then to part."

"Easier now," she replied, "but harder in the years that lie before us. The thought of your love will be my only

comfort, and whatever happens and whatever you may hear of me, remember that I love you."

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed quickly. "I do not understand you. What is going to happen, save that we part?"

"Much may happen to both of us," she answered; "there is a long span of life before us."

"I thought you spoke as if you had some definite incident in your mind, as if you knew of something that was going to happen, something that might lead me to think—to think ill of you."

She shook her head sadly and was silent.

"Laura," he cried passionately, "if there is any such thing—if there is some other reason for refusing to marry me beyond the fact of Ben Holland's death, tell me, for God's sake tell me."

"It is because of Ben Holland's death that I cannot marry you," she replied in a steady voice; "there is nothing else between us."

"I believe you," he said simply.

"And you trust me?" she asked.

"I trust you."

"And you love me?" she whispered.

"I shall always love you."

"Good-bye, dear heart," she said, holding out her hand. "Remember those words of yours in the days to come. I shall not forget them."

"I will remember them," he said, and then, raising her hand to his lips, he kissed it reverently. It might have seemed that the occasion called for a more passionate good-bye, for a long embrace, for hot kisses on a tear-stained face, for burning words of love. But that quiet kiss on the hand was more than all of these. It was an act of reverence, of homage, of devotion to one greater than himself.

"Good-bye," he said hoarsely, holding both her hands in his. "Good-bye, my queen."

"Good-bye, my king," she faltered.

He loosed her hands and left the room and went out into the long night.

Two days after the departure of John Shil, Laura Vane received a letter from her aunt in London, asking her to pay a visit which had long been talked of, but which had never taken place.

As may be imagined, this letter was not the result of a

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fortunate accident. Laura Vane had often been asked to stay with Mrs Tolby, her father's only sister, but an intense love for her own home and for the quiet beauty of the country in which she lived had always made the idea of even a short stay in the great metropolis distasteful to her. When, however, she had decided to marry William Tankerlane, she saw the value of such an easy method of leaving home without exciting comment. She wrote to her aunt and suggested paying her a visit at the earliest opportunity.

The reply was such as might have been written by any kind, motherly woman, who had no children of her own, and a sincere affection for her brother's only daughter.

Old Sam Vane raised no objection to the visit. It was evident to the old farmer that the breaking off of Laura's engagement to John Shil had seriously affected her health. She had given no reason for declining to marry the young land agent, beyond the fact that she felt the marriage would be an unhappy one. Her father had not pressed the matter. He had merely said that he was very sorry, and that she must do what she thought best for her own happiness. No suspicion of the truth, nor even of part of the truth, ever entered his plain, honest mind.

The night before her departure she spent the evening, as usual, with him in the parlour. Her heart was very sad, but she let no trace of her sorrow find expression in her face or voice. On the contrary, she appeared to be in boisterous spirits. She laughed and sang and jested, and her beautiful face was flushed with eager excitement. A more critical observer than old Sam Vane would have noticed that her merriment was hovering on the verge of hysteria. But he only saw a young girl exulting in the thought of a visit to a great and wonderful city.

“You're right to be plazed, my lass,” he said, with a kindly smile, as she had just rattled off a lively little song. “Sure sartin, you'm right to be plazed. There's a wonnerful lot to be seen in Lunnon, and the sight of it'll do you good. Yet a selfish old fool is not over-plazed to-night.”

She came behind his chair, and, throwing her arms round his neck, kissed him on the forehead. It was well for him that he could not see her face. As the sunlight on the waving grass dies at the coming of a storm, so had the laughter died from her lips and eyes.

"Dear old father," she said gaily, yet with ever so slight a tremor in her voice, "you mustn't mope while I'm away. It'll only be for a little while, and I shall come back to you as well and strong as—as well and strong as——" She stooped and kissed him again. She could not, for the moment, trust her voice to utter another word, or she would have broken down altogether. As she turned away from the chair, her face was white with pain. She felt as though her kiss had been the kiss of Judas.

She sought refuge at the piano, and played one of Chopin's nocturnes. And, as she played, the tears came into her eyes, and trickled down her cheeks. But the old man in the chair saw none of this, and, by the time she had finished the piece, she had regained her self-control. She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and then sprang up from her seat with a merry little laugh.

"How do you think Aunt Jane will like that?" she said, seating herself on the arm of her father's chair. "A bit too classical, eh?"

"Dang Aunt Jane," replied her father roughly. "You know, lass, what one old fool thinks of your playin' and singin', and how he reckons he laid out money to bear good interest when he had 'ee brought up a fine lady, so to speak. And now one more song, Laurie, and then do 'ee get to bed. To-morrow morning at six I'll drive 'ee to the station."

"What song will you have, father," she said, "as a last song to remember me by?"

"Don't 'ee talk like that," he said fiercely. "I won't have 'ee talk like that. It's a-temptin' of Providence to talk like that."

"Till I return, you dear old father," she said heartily. "A month from now, not a day longer, mind you. Heigho, for a London lady, who's forgotten how to make butter and picks up her skirts—so."

She jumped off the seat, and made him a mocking little curtsey, and, walking across to the piano, turned over a pile of songs.

"What shall I sing you, father?" she asked again. She knew his favourite song, and her heart trembled as she asked the question. He had always evinced a strange liking for Tosti's "Good-bye," a melody that was quite out of keeping with his usual taste in music. But she had carefully avoided singing it that night.

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"The old favourite," he replied, after a pause, caused no doubt by some hesitation as to whether it would not be too affecting under the circumstances.

"Good-bye?" she queried softly.

"Ay, lass," he said, "that's it. 'Twill be seasonable, so to speak, to-night."

She did not answer him, and for a few moments there was no sound but the rustling of the music as she turned it over.

"I cannot find it," she faltered.

"Can't find it?" cried her father with a jovial laugh. "Why, lass, you allus sings it without the bit of paper before 'ee."

"Yes, of course," she replied. "How stupid of me! Why, of course, I can sing it, but I am so excited to-night, you dear old thing, and the words seem to have gone out of my head. But there, you shall have it, and if I break down, you'll know I've forgotten the words."

She seated herself at the piano, played the opening bars of the accompaniment, and commenced Whyte Melville's well-known lines:—

"Falling leaf and fading tree,
Lines of white on a sullen sea,
Shadows rising for you and me."

And as she sang them softly, tenderly, and with the deep emotion of her heart in every note, her father sat in his arm-chair and wondered what strange new meaning had come into the words he knew so well.

"The swallows are making them ready to fly,
Wheeling out on a windy sky,
Good-bye to summer, good bye, good-bye."

The old man bowed his head, and a tear trickled down his rugged cheek. Then he drew himself straight up, ashamed of his emotion. His daughter was leaving him for a month. It was absurd to suppose that the words had any possible reference to her departure. And yet she sang them as if her whole being was thrilled with their reality. Never before had he heard such depth of feeling in her voice. It was the voice not of an artist striving for effect, but the cry of one whose farewell was wrung from the heart itself.

But the singer, who alone knew the truth of the situation,

struggled on bravely to the end. She knew that she would not return in a month, nor yet in a year, and perhaps she would never return at all, or, when she did come back to her home, perchance her father would not be there to greet her.

"Good-bye to hope, good-bye, good-bye."

Here was the motto of the long days that were to be, the epitaph on the tomb of her happiness.

Yet in spite of all she felt, and of all she feared, her courage never failed her, and the last "good-bye" in the song rang out clear and true, and there was no more tremor in the voice than the words required of the singer.

But when she had finished and the last bar of the accompaniment had died away into silence, her strength failed her, and she burst into a passionate fit of weeping. Her father rose to his feet and came hurriedly over to her side.

"Nay, nay, lass," he exclaimed. "We'll have none o' this. A month with Aunt Jane bean't such a ter'ble thing arter all. You'm tired, Laurie."

He laid his rough hand on her shoulder, and she smiled up at him through her tears.

"I'm a little idiot," she replied, "but somehow I felt that song to-night."

"Mebbe thinking of him, lass."

"Yes, father," she whispered. "I was thinking of him."

"Poor lass, poor lass!" he said. "I was a clumsy old fool to hev asked 'ee to sing it. I should have remembered. But there, there, Laurie, 'twill all come right in the end. Mebbe you've quarrelled. Mebbe it's your fault as well as his. But it will come right, lass; it will come right."

"Yes," she answered wearily, "it will come right, perhaps. And now, you dear old father, I'm off to bed."

She rose to her feet, closed the piano, and, taking her father's arm, laughed in his face.

"Good night, you old dear," she said, "and you'll think of me to-morrow singing Tosti's 'Good-bye' to Aunt Jane."

"Good night, Laurie, my lass," he exclaimed tenderly.

Then she kissed him lightly on both cheeks, and went off to bed.

But in the seclusion of her own room she gave way to all the grief that was in her heart.

CHAPTER VIII

A SPLENDID PAUPER

MRS WILLIAM TANKERLANE sat before the open window of her private sitting-room in the Hotel Imperial, in Paris. A sheet of writing paper lay on the little ormolu table before her. She held a pen in her fingers, and every now and then she dipped it into a brass ink-pot, as though she were about to commence a letter. But time after time the ink dried on the nib, and no words were written on the paper.

She had changed greatly during the few months which had elapsed since her marriage to William Tankerlane, and the change was not altogether for the better. Her beauty, it is true, had not suffered, and her pale face, crowned with its aureole of copper-coloured hair, seemed more lovely than it had ever been in the days of her greatest happiness. But there was a hard look in her eyes, and coldness in the composure of her features. She had changed from a laughing girl to a queenly woman, and the change was not altogether to her advantage.

It was clear from the luxury of her surroundings and the costly simplicity of her dress that she had made what many women would have considered a good match. William Tankerlane had a splendid allowance from his father, and, being himself a man of simple tastes, and with no bent towards any of the meaner vices of life, he was able to lavish his wealth on his wife with an open hand.

It was a glorious morning in May, a month in which Paris is seen at its best. Outside the window the double lines of trees looked green and cool in the bright sunshine. Easy-going flaneurs of the boulevards loitered in the shade, and chattered to one another with untiring vivacity. Streams of pedestrians, bent either on business or pleasure, passed to and fro unceasingly. Everywhere there was life and movement, and endless flow of good-humour and serene content.

Slowly and deliberately Laura took up an envelope and addressed it to "Samuel Vane, Esq., Upper Leaze Farm, Laverstone," and then she laid down the pen, and again stared out of the window.

She had resolved, in direct defiance of her husband's wishes, to write to her father. From the day after she left Laverstone, and never arrived at Mrs Tolby's house, Sam Vane had not heard a word of the daughter that was lost to him. On the day following her departure he received two letters, one from his sister asking why Laura Vane had not arrived, and one from the girl herself, which ran as follows:—

"DEAREST FATHER,—For reasons I cannot explain to you, I have not gone to Aunt Jane's, and shall not return to Laverstone. Do not worry about me. Be assured that I have come, and shall come, to no harm. Forgive me for this step, which has been forced upon me. God bless you, and guard you, dearest, is ever the earnest prayer of your loving daughter,
"LAURIE."

And this message, which was hardly calculated to allay a father's anxiety, was all that Sam Vane had heard from his missing daughter.

But now, at last, she had resolved to break the silence. Day after day she had been tortured with the thought of her father's loneliness and despair. She had pictured him to herself in the home that had been left unto him desolate. An old man, broken-hearted, vainly crying out to God for her return. Again and again she had implored her husband to let her write, and he had refused, gently, but with firmness. William Tankerlane, in spite of all his sin, had been very kind to her, and she wished to obey him. But at last she had resolved to write, and could not frame the sentences which meant so much to her.

Once more she dipped her pen in the ink, and wrote her name on a slip of blotting-paper.

Then she heard the sound of steps and voices in the passage outside. She looked hurriedly at the clock, tore the envelope in half, threw the pieces into the waste-paper basket under the table, and rose to her feet.

A moment later the door opened, and William Tankerlane entered, accompanied by a short, fair-haired young man, exquisitely dressed and groomed.

"Laura," said her husband, as he thrust forward his blushing companion, "let me introduce you to Lord Portlington. He is the son of Lord Crawcour, an old friend of our family."

Laura Tankerlane bowed, and then extended her hand with a pleasant smile. The name of Portlington had conveyed nothing to her mind. But the name of Crawcour sent a flush to her cheek, for John Shil had gone as agent to the Earl of Crawcour, and it was possible that this young man might be able to give her some news of him.

"This is an old friend of mine," said Tankerlane, as they sat down by the open window. "'Piggy' Portlington, we used to call him, when he was at Eton. He's straight as a die, and won't split on us. I have told him the reasons for our secret marriage," and he looked at his wife meaningly. She wondered what reasons he had given.

"I am very pleased to meet Lord Portlington," she replied. "It is nice to have found a friend in Paris. We have been a bit lonely."

A shade of annoyance passed across Tankerlane's face, but the young man chuckled genially.

"A very jolly sort of loneliness," he replied. "I wouldn't mind changing places with Tankerlane—I mean, I wish I were on my honeymoon, you know," and he blushed furiously, as though he had said something highly improper. The other two laughed, and Mrs Tankerlane looked at the handsome, boyish face with interest. He was a very pleasant young fellow, this heir to the great earldom of Crawcour. Candour and honesty were written on his countenance. He was obviously fond of outdoor exercise and sport. His clear, keen eyes and tanned skin spoke of a life spent in the open air. His hands were muscular and his movements indicated the strength and suppleness of the athlete.

As she looked from this fine specimen of clean-living and open-minded manhood to the dark, intellectual face of her husband, she wondered what strange freak of fate had made the two men friends. For never were two men more utterly unlike each other. That frank, easy-going nature could have little in common with the subtle mind and indomitable will of William Tankerlane. Yet she was glad that the two were friends, and that her husband had brought round the young man to see her.

"Have you been in Paris long?" she asked, after they had talked about various subjects.

"Only a little while," he replied; "less than a fortnight ago I was at Crawcour. I've heaps to see and do. It's only my second visit here. I hope we'll all be able to go to some theatres together. Let me book three seats for the Colonnade to-night. There is a new actress, an American, I've heard, but quite French in her accent."

"I should be delighted," Mrs Tankerlane said, as though enraptured with the idea. But her thoughts were far away from the Theatre Colonnade, and she was waiting to turn the conversation back to Crawcour.

"Right you are," said Tankerlane. "Will you dine with us?"

"Thanks, and we'll make a jolly evening of it. Supper afterwards at the Ritz, eh? It'll be great. I suppose you don't go out much?"

"Oh yes," Tankerlane replied coldly. "Why shouldn't we?"

"I thought perhaps—perhaps," he stammered, and stopped, growing very red in the face. Mrs Tankerlane came to the rescue.

"We didn't at first," she said with a smile; "my husband was afraid of being recognised. But we are braver now. You see, lots of people know Will, but none of them know me. He's met some of them, and they've asked questions, and, well——" She laughed merrily.

"You are the first of them I have introduced to my wife," said Tankerlane.

"It is a great honour for me," Portlington replied simply.

The words were spoken in such a way that they seemed no mere empty compliment, but a genuine expression of gratitude for the favour.

"I suppose you find Paris a welcome change after the quiet of Crawcour," she said, reverting to the subject still uppermost in her mind, and introducing it with a commonplace remark.

"Yes," he replied, "for a week or two. I couldn't stick it for much longer. I am very fond of my home, though I believe it is considered bad form to be so. I like a country life, and Crawcour is really a ripping place. You must come down there when Tankerlane has made it up with his gov'nor. I'll take you out in my yacht."

"I have always heard Crawcour is a very beautiful place," she said, "and I hope to see it some day—by the bye, Will, if I'm

going to the theatre to-night, I should like the hairdresser to come round. You might go and telephone for him at once."

"Certainly, Laura. You'll excuse me a moment, Piggy," and he left the room.

"There's a model husband for you," said Portlington gaily; "some men would have rung the bell and told a servant to do it."

"We have not been married long," replied Mrs Tankerlane, with a laugh; "but we were talking of Crawcour. I should so much like to see it. Now I come to think of it, I believe Sir Robert Tankerlane's agent is managing your father's estate."

"What, John Shil? Why, yes, of course. I remember he was recommended by Sir Robert, who is an old friend of my father's."

"How does he get on?"

"Oh, splendidly. He's one of the best: a thorough sportsman, a good man of business, and a fine fellow all round. We like him immensely. One of my sisters is quite in love with him."

"We all like him very much," said Laura, "and I'm speaking from a tenant's standpoint. How does Essex suit him? He was not well when he left Laverstone."

"He doesn't look up to the mark," the young man replied, "but I never met such a beggar for work. His physical strength must be enormous. He's a quiet, reserved sort of chap. I should say he's had a lot of trouble, and is trying to forget it in sheer hard labour."

"Yes, he has had a lot of trouble," said Laura slowly. "Lord Portlington, I will be frank with you. I can trust you, and should like you to be my friend. John Shil was at one time engaged to be married to me. I only tell you this because I wish to ask you not to mention his name to my husband; and of course you will say nothing of me to Mr Shil or anyone else."

Lord Portlington stared at her in amazement, and then, recovering his senses, held out his hand.

"Here's my hand on it, Mrs Tankerlane," he said. "I'm not very brilliant, but I think I understand."

But, as a matter of fact, he understood very little. He thought that Mrs Tankerlane, dazzled by the attention of the heir to the Tankerlane estates, had thrown over her humbler lover, and that she was sorry for him. Mrs Tankerlane would have asked more about the man she loved, but at that moment her husband entered.

They all three talked together about various commonplace subjects, and then Lord Portlington left.

When he had gone, Tankerlane crossed over to the writing-table by the window, and looked at the sheet of paper, bearing the date in his wife's handwriting.

"To whom are you writing, Laurie?" he asked quietly; but there was a glance of suspicion in his eyes that did not accord with the indifferent tone of his voice.

"Oh, to Elise," Laura replied; "that new frock she is making for me—they are so slow, these dressmakers. I can't think how they employ their time."

She flung herself in a chair with her back to him, and turned over the pages of a new book.

He glanced at her, shrugged his shoulders, and then, bending down, picked up the two torn halves of an envelope from the waste-paper basket. As he read the address, a hot flush of anger came into his sallow face.

"Laurie," he said sternly.

"Yes," she replied, without looking round at him.

"You lied to me just now. You were writing to your father—in direct opposition to my wishes."

"My whole life is a lie," she answered quietly; "one falsehood more or less does not matter."

He came over to her side, with the pieces of the envelope crushed tightly in his hands.

"Laurie," he said fiercely, "I know that you do not love me, but I treat you as if you did. I allow you to do as you please. I only ask that you shall be loyal to me and not do things behind my back."

She rose to her feet and faced him, white and trembling.

"I am fulfilling my part of the bargain," she said coldly.

"We have not even quarrelled yet. I am your wife. I will do what you wish me to do."

Then she turned and moved slowly towards the door.

"Laurie," he cried passionately, "forgive me."

But she did not answer him, and, passing out of the room, closed the door behind her.

He had asked for his due and he had obtained it.



CHAPTER IX

LA PETITE JACKSON

LAURA TANKERLANE took especial pains over her toilet for the theatre that night. In spite of the shadow which had come over her life, and of the serious matters which were for ever uppermost in her mind, she was a woman who made the most of such small pleasures as life could still afford her. She was sensible enough to see that only strict attention to the more trivial details of existence could save her from insanity or death.

Laura Tankerlane was a beautiful woman and a rich woman, and it stands to her credit that she made the best of such advantages as fortune, none too kind to her in the more important things of life, had bestowed upon her face.

She had, indeed, every reason to be satisfied with her appearance, as she looked at herself in the long mirror in her bedroom before going downstairs to dinner. Art and nature alike had done all in their power to produce the perfect picture that was reflected in the glass. Her face was pale and cold, but faultlessly beautiful. Her magnificent hair had been roped and twined and arranged by one of the first artists in Paris. Her dress, one of Paquin's most marvellous and gorgeous creations, was in itself sufficient to excite the envy of every woman who set eyes on it. A tiara of diamonds glittered on her head, a string of the same cold, sparkling jewels enhanced the soft whiteness of her throat, and a line of diamond stars scintillated along the corsage of her dress. She wore no gems but diamonds, and had always refused to accept anything else from her husband. Perhaps she looked upon them as the hard emblems of her life.

She looked at herself for a few moments in the glass, and smiled faintly as she thought of the contrast between this

picture and the one she had seen every day in her little white bedroom at home. Her maid, a French girl, stood behind her with a rapturous look in her dark eyes.

Laura Tankerlane went down to dinner, and the meal was a pleasant one for all parties concerned. Lord Portlington brought with him an atmosphere of boyish geniality. Tankerlane himself, proud of his wife's beauty and of the evident effect it produced on his friend, was in the best of spirits, while Laura was only too glad of this change from the daily *tête-à-tête* meal with her husband, and exerted herself to appear as happy and charming as possible.

When the meal was over, they drove to the Colonnade, and entered the box which Lord Portlington had secured for them. The piece had not yet commenced, but the more fashionable parts of the house were nearly full. A new actress was appearing in Paris that night. For weeks past the papers had teemed with puffs and paragraphs about her beauty, her genius, and the jewels which were rumoured to have come from the scion of a Royal house. She was not a Frenchwoman, and therefore Paris was anxious to see her, and, if necessary, disapprove of her presumption in appearing in a French play.

All eyes were turned on the newcomers, as they took their seats in the box, Laura Tankerlane in the middle, and the two men on each side of her. Tankerlane smiled grimly as he saw the opera-glasses turned on them, and kept in position for a longer space than courtesy or even curiosity demanded. A fierce joy seized him as he saw the eager looks of the men and the envious glances of the women. He had paid a long price for his wife—a price that was not to be reckoned in sovereigns, but in moments like these he was repaid.

It mattered nothing to him that he recognised two or three acquaintances in the house. He knew well enough that they would wonder what relation he bore to the beautiful woman by his side. But he did not care what they thought. Their curiosity would remain unsatisfied.

Laura was not in the least discomposed by the amount of attention she received. Her indifference showed very plainly the change that her nature had undergone since she left Laverstone. It was hard to believe that the daughter of a simple farmer could sit unmoved with the eyes of fashionable Paris staring at her. But she returned their stare with well-bred composure, and took in all the details of the women's



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dresses and jewels, as though she were examining a row of fashion plates. Under ordinary circumstances such a feat would have been the result of years of training. But there are moments in our lives which count for more in the moulding of character than many years.

When the piece commenced, she turned her attention to the stage. The play was a modern drama, well written, vigorous, an artistic combination of light and shade. Ten minutes after the rise of the curtain, the Comtesse de Larnac, played by the new American actress, was announced, and a rustle of expectation ran through the house. As she entered, there was a burst of applause—the generous recognition given by a Parisian audience to a foreigner.

Laura Tankerlane's glasses were fixed on the face of Mademoiselle Jackson, and she did not notice that her husband, who had been leaning forward over the edge of the box, had suddenly started to an upright position, and had then leant back so that his face was hidden from the stage.

The first impression of the new actress, who was expected to take Paris by storm, was a trifle disappointing to an audience accustomed to distinction, if not actual beauty, in the appearance of its favourites. She was small, almost insignificant of stature, and her face was not in any way remarkable for its loveliness. Her hair and eyes were the most noticeable features. The hair was dark, glossy, and abundant; the eyes were very large and brilliant, a combination of qualities that is rarely found, for large eyes are generally dull and lustreless, and keen, piercing eyes are usually small. But in spite of these two redeeming features, the general opinion was decidedly against Mademoiselle Jackson, and the applause died away very suddenly as she came into full view of the audience.

"What a mite!" whispered Lord Portlington. "Poor little thing!"

Mrs Tankerlane did not reply. Her glasses were still levelled on the girl's face. The great eyes fascinated her. For a second they rested on the box in which she sat, and in that second Mrs Tankerlane felt that this little actress had read all the story of her life. She shivered, and then leant back in her chair. And then she noticed that her husband was not looking at the stage. She smiled. It was hardly likely that Mademoiselle Jackson would rivet the attention of a man like William Tankerlane.



Yet before ten minutes had elapsed, this fragile, insignificant little woman had gripped her audience with so strong a hold that the whole house seemed to vibrate to the words that came from her lips, and, before the first act was over, the critics realised that a great genius had come into their midst.

The first note of her voice broke the spell of indifference and even contempt with which her entrance had been greeted. It was a wonderful voice, strong and resonant, and yet so perfectly under control that its merest whisper was distinct. Not a single inflection of it was lost on those who heard it. It portrayed the mind and heart of the speaker as clearly as though all her thoughts and emotions had been written down on paper.

"Here," said Legage, the greatest dramatist of the century, "is a woman with a soul. I expect great things of this little one."

And Legage was not disappointed. Mademoiselle Jackson did great things that night. It is a great thing for a beautiful and distinguished-looking woman to hold an audience for three hours. But it is a greater thing still for a woman, who is neither beautiful nor distinguished in appearance, to accomplish the same task.

And so well did Mademoiselle Jackson accomplish it that, before the end of the second act, everyone in the house had come to the conclusion that she was one of the most beautiful women they had ever seen. Her face, indeed, was for the time radiant with the light of the soul within.

Amid the scene of enthusiasm which greeted the piece from first to last, William Tankerlane could have scarcely remained in the obscurity of the box without attracting an unpleasant amount of attention. For the sake of common decency he was bound to keep his eyes on the stage. He made, however, some excuse about the discomfort of screwing his head round the corner of the box, and moved his chair directly behind his wife's. He had decided to leave Paris the next morning.

When the performance was over they went on to supper at the Ritz. Tankerlane tried to get out of it by pleading a sudden attack of neuralgia. But his wife, who would have been glad of a *tête-à-tête* conversation with Lord Portlington, accepted his excuses too readily, and he decided to accompany them. He was a man of a jealous disposition, and the knowledge that his wife did not love him, was not calculated to



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allay any suspicions he might form as to her motive for wishing to be alone with his friend.

Very trifling incidents will alter the course of a whole life, even as a pebble on the height of the Rocky Mountains may turn the course of a stream either to the Atlantic or Pacific oceans; and the snug little supper at the Ritz that night was destined to have so stupendous an influence on the lives of William Tankerlane and his wife that it assumed the importance of a catastrophe.

The room was full of a chattering crowd of fashionable men and women, and resounded with the laughter of the light-hearted Parisians. And the little table occupied by the three English people contributed its share to the general merriment. Lord Portlington was in his very best form, and Laura, whose mind had been diverted from her own troubles by the play she had just witnessed, laughed and jested like a young girl who has tasted none of the sorrows of life. Even Tankerlane, with that in his thoughts which might well have made a man grave, had sufficient strength of mind to appear almost as gay as his companions.

To say the truth, however, he had but little fear for the future. It was his last night in Paris. To-morrow both he and his wife would be back in London. The danger, which threatened him, would be a thing of the past. The near approach of safety is apt to make men restless, or else Tankerlane would not have been supping in the Ritz that night.

But, when they were half-way through their meal, a sudden hush came over the chattering throng, and Tankerlane caught the words "La Petite Jackson" from the lips of a fair-haired woman at the next table. He looked up, slowly and deliberately, so as not to attract attention, and there, twenty feet away from him, with her large sparkling eyes looking straight into his face, stood the woman that of all women in the world he least desired to meet.

The two looked at each other for perhaps three seconds, and in that time no sign of recognition appeared on their faces. The woman, skilled actress that she was, had perfect command over her features. She was the more surprised of the two, for Tankerlane had already seen her in the theatre. But she showed no surprise, and scarcely betrayed more than a passing interest in the man before her. She just paused at the door, and then, turning to her companions, a man and

two women, she made some remark to them in French, and followed the obsequious waiter to the only empty table in the room—a table, as it so happened, next to the one at which Tankerlane was sitting.

The whole scene had been so momentary that it had escaped the notice of Lord Portlington and Laura Tankerlane, both of whom recognised the actress, and were busily occupied in noting how she looked off the stage. Tankerlane himself had apparently merely glanced at her, and had then resumed his meal.

Mademoiselle Jackson sat down just behind Tankerlane, but facing his wife, who was sitting on the opposite side of the table. In that hour he was thankful for even the smallest of mercies, and the fact that his back was turned to the woman he did not wish to see, afforded him a momentary respite from the agonies of a most trying situation.

Mrs Tankerlane and Lord Portlington resumed their lively conversation, but after a little while the former began to be aware that the actress was regarding her with an unusual amount of interest. At first she attributed this to the fascination which a beautiful frock has for all women, and especially for women who have to study the art of dressing for stage purposes. But after a time she began to realise that the interest she excited was due less to her clothes than her personality. The one was a compliment, but the other was an impertinence. Laura Tankerlane began to grow uncomfortable under the frequent glances which the actress cast at her, and she was glad when her husband suggested that it was time to go home.

Lord Portlington helped her on with her long sable opera cloak, and the waiter came forward with Tankerlane's overcoat and hat. For one brief moment Tankerlane's face was turned towards Mademoiselle Jackson, and he saw to his horror that an ostentatious smile of recognition had flashed across her face. She rose to her feet, came across to him, and held out her hand.

"Wal, this is a treat!" she said, with a rather forced American accent; "and how did you get here? Why, it must be three years since we met in Chicago."

"Really, mademoiselle," said Tankerlane, with a bow. "I think—I'm afraid you are mistaken. You are Mademoiselle Jackson, are you not?"

"Yes, now," she replied, with a laugh, "but when I met you



I was called Mrs Bonsal, and that's my name still, if there's any good in being married and getting one's husband's name."

"Mrs Bonsal!" cried Tankerlane, with well-simulated surprise. "Why, of course! What a duffer I am! Do you know, I never recognised you. And I've been watching the piece to-night. You were splendid—yes, splendid. Laura, let me introduce Mrs Bonsal to you. I saw a good deal of her and her husband some years ago in America. Mrs Bonsal—Mrs Tankerlane; Mrs Bonsal—Lord Portlington. Well, I am pleased; but you have altered, haven't you? I never recognised you. Well, this is a pleasure."

"It is indeed!" said Lord Portlington. "And to-morrow morning Mrs Bonsal will awake like Lord Byron, and find herself famous."

"I am pleased to meet you," said Laura, with a smile. "Any old friend of my husband's is a friend of mine."

"Your husband?" said Mrs Bonsal, with an inquiring glance from one to the other. "Oh yes, of course; how stupid of me! I got mixed up with the introductions. One always does, you know; I thought the other gentleman was your husband. And so you're married, are you?" and she turned to Tankerlane with a most bewitching smile.

"Oh yes, I'm married," he replied with a smile.

"I'm so glad," she continued. "I think every man ought to be married. I only hope your married life will be as happy as mine has been. My husband will be in Paris to-morrow."

William Tankerlane's face was a mere mask to his feelings as he listened to these words. His features were moulded into a polite smile of candid interest. Only one of the little group knew what was passing in his mind, and she had the exquisite pleasure of goading the man to madness with every word that she uttered.

Lord Portlington and Mrs Bonsal's companions saw nothing of the scene that was going on before their eyes, a scene which, if they had only known the facts, was in its way as dramatic as any they had witnessed in the theatre that night. The woman's words were commonplace enough, and might have been uttered by a mere acquaintance, who took a polite interest in the affairs of a man whom she had met some years previously. They did not know the bitter irony of them, for there was nothing in the woman's voice to betray her thoughts.

Laura Tankerlane, however, was well aware that something

lay beneath the surface, and that this woman had been more to her husband than a mere acquaintance in the past. Her instinct had told her this, directly the woman had spoken to William Tankerlane. She remembered the almost impertinent attention the actress had bestowed on her during the meal. And her observant mind had not forgotten the unsatisfactory way in which Mrs Bonsal had concealed her surprise at hearing of Tankerlane's marriage.

She turned to the woman with one of her sweetest smiles.

"You and your husband must come and see us, Mrs Bonsal," she said genially. "We shall be delighted to know someone in Paris. Come to-morrow afternoon, four o'clock, to tea. And if Mr Bonsal has not arrived, or doesn't care to come, well—we shall be just as glad to see you by yourself. We are staying at the Imperial."

"I shall be more than delighted," Mrs Bonsal replied.

Mr Tankerlane bit his lip with vexation. He had intended leaving Paris the next day, but he was caught now like a rat in a trap.

"We must go now," said Laura, with a sharp glance at her husband's face, "and remember to-morrow."

"I shall not forget. Good night." She held out her hand, and Laura Tankerlane took it. Something in the woman's face appealed to her. She realised that this was no common adventuress, but a woman of distinction. And, if she had turned back as she left the room, she would have seen that there was no expression of anger or jealousy on Mrs Bonsal's face, but only a soft look of pity in those large bright eyes.

William Tankerlane hardly spoke till they reached home. He was planning some way of escape from Paris.

"Why did you ask that woman round to-morrow?" he said, after he had taken off his overcoat.

"My dear Will," she replied sweetly, "I thought she was an old friend of yours, and, besides, I like her face. She is a woman I should like to know."

"Well, I shan't be in at four o'clock to-morrow," he said sullenly. "You don't know who the woman is, or you—wouldn't have asked her."

"I can guess who she was," Mrs Tankerlane answered with a smile; "you were once in love with her. I should advise you to be present at our interview. She might tell me of all sorts of things."



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"You wouldn't care," he cried fiercely. "I wish to heaven that you did. You know how I love you."

The smile died from her face and she turned away from him. But William Tankerlane resolved that his wife should not be left alone with Mrs Bonsal.

The next afternoon at 3.50 P.M. Tankerlane sat alone in the sitting-room at the Imperial. His wife had not yet returned from her shopping, though she had promised to be back at half-past three. He looked anxiously at the clock. He did not wish to be alone with Mrs Bonsal.

Then, without any warning, the door opened quietly and Mrs Bonsal entered.

"I must apologise," she said softly. "Mrs Tankerlane is downstairs. She told me to come straight up. She won't be a minute. She has a row on with the manager."

Tankerlane did not answer, but the woman, closing the door, came slowly over to his side and looked into his white face.

"Well, Mr Bonsal," she continued quietly, "I said that my husband would be in Paris to-day. I am glad to find that I was not mistaken."

William Tankerlane did not answer, but there was a look in his eyes which induced Mrs Bonsal to move from his side and seat herself in an armchair a couple of yards away from him.

"It is funny that we should meet again," she continued; "yet, of course, it was inevitable, directly I came out of a way-back town in Ohio into the glare of the footlights."

"Why have you come here?" he said hoarsely. "What right have you to come here? All was over between us years ago. I gave you the money you asked—enough to keep you in modest comfort for all your days. I have done with you. You are no wife of mine."

"Only in the eyes of the law," she replied softly.

"Oh, that's your game, is it?" he said roughly. "Black-mail, eh? Well, how much do you want to keep your mouth shut?"

"I don't want anything," she answered. "I shall speak, if it pleases me, and, if it doesn't please me, I shall be silent. As for money, well, after last night, I am not likely to starve. By the bye, is your name Bonsal or Tankerlane?"

"Tankerlane," he replied curtly. It was not worth while telling a lie, or he would have done so.

"And this woman, does she think that she is your wife, or is it merely—a temporary arrangement?"

He did not reply. He was, indeed, on the horns of a dilemma. He had either to confess to bigamy, or he had to cast a slur on the reputation of the woman he loved.

"Well?" she asked, after a pause. "Which is it? I should like to know—I shall, in fact, make it my business to know."

The struggle in Tankerlane's mind was sharp, but decisive. It stands to his credit that he spoke the truth. He was man enough to defend the honour of the woman whom he had betrayed.

"She believes that she is my wife," he said gently.

"I thought as much," the woman replied. "I saw nothing impure in that calm, beautiful face. And so you have betrayed her; you have lied to her. She is your mistress, and thinks she is your wife. Your children—bah! it sickens me to think of it. I did not know that you were such a scoundrel. Time has worked a change in you, William Tankerlane."

"Love has worked a change," he exclaimed fiercely. "A man will sacrifice anything to gain the woman he loves. I am not ashamed of what I have done. I could not get her in any other way. You can guess how such a woman would reply to a dishonourable proposal. There was no other way. I tried to gain her, and I will do as much again—ay, and more, to keep her. I will fight for her, Leonore, I will fight, and if anything threatens her happiness, I will—well, I will remove it, if it costs me my life. Do I speak plainly?"

"I understand," the woman answered, "but I am not afraid of you. And you, on the other hand, have nothing to fear from me. I am not jealous. I have no desire to claim you as my husband. It is a pity that you cannot divorce me, but I am afraid my life will bear the strictest scrutiny. I have thrust all thought of men out of my head. I live for my art, and for my art alone."

"Then why are you here?" he asked. "Why have you thrust yourself back into my life? Why could you not leave me alone? What is it that you want?"

"I wanted to learn the truth," she replied. "That woman's face has a peculiar fascination for me. I could not keep my eyes off it at supper last night. I am a student of character. She is not happy. I have come to the conclusion," she con-

tinued, "that she does not love you, and that she has married you for some other reason. I do not understand, for she does not look to me like a woman who would marry for money."

"Is there any reason why you should understand?" he asked, with a sneer on his lips.

"There is every reason," she replied. "I am your wife, and it is in my power either to speak or to keep my mouth shut. From some reason or other, I desire this woman's happiness. Perhaps it is a mere whim, but the desire is there, all the same."

"It does you great credit, Leonore," the man said fervently. "But you are mistaken in thinking that she does not love me."

"That is just what I want to find out. If she does not love you, she might be glad of some news that would make her free again."

"Not if she had married me for my money," he interrupted; "and, in any case, the shame would kill her. But there is no need to contemplate such an action on your part. Laura loves me, and I will fight to keep her—ay, fight to the bitter end."

His eyes flashed, and he squared his broad shoulders. He was a fine figure of a man, and the pose suited him well. Yet, for all his brave bearing, he was trembling with fear. If this woman once learnt the truth, she would tell Laura everything, and the latter would accept the shame with resignation, knowing that the shame had given her freedom.

"That is what I have come here for," the woman said slowly, "just to learn the truth, that is all. The problem before me is an interesting one, but it is very difficult."

"Why can't you leave it alone?" cried Tankerlane. "It can't make any difference to you one way or the other."

"The problem is a very difficult one," she continued, as though she had not heard the interruption, "for even if she loves you, it might be better for me to tell her the truth. I could, of course, divorce you. Then she could be legally married to you, and you could both live happily ever afterwards."

A cold sweat broke out on Tankerlane's forehead. This woman, more keen and subtle of mind than himself, presented a fresh facet of thought to every argument.

"The shame would break her heart," he said gently.

"Not if she loved you," the woman replied; "not if she

really loved you. The first sting of it would be keen; but you would justify your deception. You would be willing to make amends. She would forgive you; she would be glad that she had learnt the truth in time; she would think of her children, and she would be glad."

"I think you had better leave well alone," he stammered lamely; "we are happy. Surely that is enough. Your motives are doubtless excellent, but I am sure that if you interfere you will only make mischief."

"I shall see," she replied. "I am here to-day for that purpose. I shall see if she loves you, and then I shall know how to act."

"She loves me," he said doggedly.

"Doesn't it strike you as curious that she has left us so long alone together? It almost seems as though she knew that—almost as though she wished to place a temptation in your path."

"A temptation?" said the man scornfully. "She knows that I love her with all my heart and soul, and that no woman on earth could tempt me."

But in spite of the scorn in his voice, he had felt the sting of the woman's words. It was more than possible, nay, it was probable, that Laura had for some reason or other purposely left him alone with Mrs Bonsal. He moved towards the door. He realised that he must see Laura before she entered the room. He must ask her, must implore her, to pretend to love him while Mrs Bonsal was present.

Then he stopped. He remembered that, even if Mrs Bonsal was convinced of Laura's love for him, she might still think it best to speak the truth. He floated between Scylla and Charybdis, between the grinding rocks and the whirlpool of the sea.

And, before he could make up his mind what course to take, the door opened, and Laura herself entered with an apologetic smile on her face.

"I am so sorry," she said, crossing to Mrs Bonsal's side. "But I've had an awful time downstairs with Monsieur Taque. I daresay, however, you two have not missed me; you have had a long, long talk over old times. Eh? Well, I think we'll have tea now."

And from that moment the whole scene outwardly passed from tragedy to the commonplace. A stranger would have



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seen nothing but the ordinary spectacle of a man and two women discussing trifles over their tea-cups. Yet Mrs Bonsal's whole mind was on the alert to discover whether Laura loved her husband. Laura was trying to find out whether the actress still loved Tankerlane, and Tankerlane himself felt like a criminal before his judge.

Yet they all three chatted together as though there were no more serious troubles in life than dressmaker's bills, and when they parted, an hour later, the two women kissed each other on the cheek.

William Tankerlane was anxious to leave Paris as soon as possible, but his wife, by an irony of fate, was taken ill with influenza the day after the tea party, and it was impossible to move her from the hotel.



CHAPTER X

THE KNOT AND THE SWORD

DURING her illness Laura conceived a strange and overpowering desire for the company of Mrs Bonsal, and all Tankerlane's efforts to keep the two women apart were doomed to failure. The doctor said that Mrs Tankerlane must be humoured, and so it came to pass that Mrs Bonsal was a frequent visitor at the Hotel Imperial, and almost took upon herself the duties of a nurse.

Strange though it may seem to one unversed in the ways of women, these two, who by all laws of nature should have been deadly enemies, had formed a friendship, in which self-interest and a desire to pry into each other's affairs found no part. They had conceived a genuine liking for each other.

The actress, who alone knew the truth, was not at all jealous of the woman who had assumed her lawful place. She had cut out Tankerlane from her life as completely as though he had never existed. All her thoughts were for the woman who believed herself to be Tankerlane's wife. She had a genuine desire to help Laura, and, though she could not decide whether to tell her the truth or keep silence, her decision would only be influenced by the most unselfish motives.

Laura, on the other hand, who knew nothing of the truth, and who merely suspected that at some time or other William Tankerlane had been in love with Mrs Bonsal, found this suspicion no obstacle to friendship. She did not love the man she believed to be her husband, and his past amours were nothing to her. The situation was much simplified by the fact that neither of the women had the slightest consideration for Mr Tankerlane.

It was not long before Mrs Bonsal found out what she wished to know. Perhaps Laura, in her weak state of health,



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was less able to disguise her emotions, and to pretend an affection that she did not feel. Perhaps, on the other hand, she took no pains to hide the truth from the kindly woman who attended so thoughtfully to all her wants and comforts. But, in any case, Mrs Bonsal learnt the truth, and realised that Mrs Tankerlane was not in love with her husband, and that his presence was even repugnant to her.

This discovery gave Mrs Bonsal much food for reflection. Such a position would have been quite in the ordinary course of events if the young couple had been married for any length of time. But they were still on their honeymoon. It was probable, therefore, that Laura had married a man she had never loved, and was never likely to love. Why did she marry him? That was the question which presented itself to Mrs Bonsal's mind, and it was a question to which she could find no answer.

One thing, however, she intended to discover, and that was, whether Laura desired her freedom, and, if not, whether she would rather have her marriage legalised before a child was born. It was a difficult, almost an impossible matter to approach, and Mrs Bonsal thought long and carefully before she decided on the most delicate method of ascertaining Laura's wishes.

She finally decided to adopt a ruse, which is at least as old as the days of David, and which has never yet been surpassed for arriving at a personal opinion through the medium of an impersonal problem.

Mrs Bonsal waited till the day before Mrs Tankerlane was going to leave Paris.

"You are really leaving to-morrow?" she said, as they sat alone in the sitting-room at the Hotel Imperial.

"Yes," answered Laura faintly, "we are leaving. My husband absolutely refuses to stay another day in Paris. The doctor says I can travel if the necessary precautions are taken."

"I shall be sorry to lose you, dear," said Mrs Bonsal, "very, very sorry," and she laid her hand on the invalid's thin white fingers.

"I am very sorry to go," replied Laura. "Do you know, Leonore, I can't help thinking that my husband dislikes you, and that he is leaving Paris to get me away from you. He announced his intention of going on the day after we first met you."

"I know that your husband dislikes me," Mrs Bonsal replied, "and if we are to be friends, I should like to tell you the reason why he dislikes me. It is a sordid story, but I think it is right that you should know."

"I should like to know," murmured Laura faintly. "I am sure that, whatever you did, you would always try to act for the best."

Mrs Bonsal leant over and kissed her.

"Many years ago," Mrs Bonsal began, "your husband was a great friend of Mr Bonsal's. He did not know me at that time, for I had been separated from Mr Bonsal for some years. We had never been divorced, as there was no cause for divorce on either side. We had merely agreed to part.

"Then it so happened that Mr Bonsal fell passionately in love with a girl, and, as I subsequently found out, persuaded the girl to marry him, though she did not love him.

"Fate brought me once more on the scene, and I found Mr Bonsal, under another name, apparently married to this girl. The girl knew nothing of the truth, and believed that she was the man's wife.

"Two courses were now open to me: I could keep silence or I could proclaim the truth. I had no thought of myself in the matter, I did not even consider Mr Bonsal. I only wished to do that which was best for the girl."

"And what did you do?" Laura asked eagerly.

"I told the truth. I argued that, if the girl did not love him, she would perhaps be glad of an escape from bondage, and that, whether she loved him or not, it would be better for her to know the truth. I intended, if she wished it, to divorce him, so that he could be legally married to her."

"You did right," cried Laura fiercely. "You did right. And what happened then?"

"I believe," continued Mrs Bonsal, as though she had not heard the question, "that I did right—am sure that I did right. But it was a cruel blow to strike."

"And what happened then?" Laura repeated, with her eyes fixed on Mrs Bonsal's face.

The actress did not answer. Her story had come to an end. The rest lay in the future. Her fertile brain could easily have invented a conclusion to the tale, but she wished to arouse Laura's suspicions of the truth, and, in order to do this, she kept silence.



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"Surely that is not the end of the story," continued Laura, with dogged persistence. "Did the girl love the man or not? Did the result justify your action?"

"The girl did not love the man," Mrs Bonsal replied with downcast eyes, and an intentional hesitation in her voice.

"What did you do?" asked Laura. She had as yet no suspicion of the truth.

The situation was becoming unbearable.

Mrs Bonsal's heart beat very fast. She had resolved to tell everything, but she had no wish to do it in so many words. She wanted Laura herself to guess the truth. She was again silent, and twined her fingers together nervously. She desired to let her actions speak for her. It seemed impossible that anyone could fail to misinterpret her confusion.

"That is a lame end to the story, Leonore," said Laura, after a long pause. "Why don't you look at me? Is the end painful? Ah, I see, things did not turn out right after all. You found that you had not acted for the best. Well, don't tell me any more, dear. I am sure that you were right in what you did. My husband, I suppose, thought that you were wrong. As a friend of Mr Bonsal's, he thought you had acted from motives of jealousy and spite. But you were right. No good, no right-thinking woman could have acted otherwise."

Mrs Bonsal was silent, and her face grew very white and haggard. She had failed to arouse any suspicion of the truth. It would have to be spoken openly. It was a cruel piece of business, but it would have to be carried through remorselessly. No delicacy of speech or language could hide the brutality of it. Mrs Bonsal rose from her chair, and, falling on her knees by Laura's side, took hold of the thin white hands and pressed them to her lips.

"What is it, dear?" said Laura. "I am so sorry—I wish I had not asked you to tell the story."

"Laura," replied Mrs Bonsal in a voice that hardly rose above a whisper, "is it possible that you do not understand? I have tried so hard to make you understand—so hard, Laura." She bowed her head over the girl's hands, and the white fingers were wet with tears.

Laura looked down on the dark masses of lustrous hair, and wondered why this woman had flung herself at her feet. It almost seemed as though she were praying for forgiveness. But still no suspicion of the truth entered her mind.

"Oh, why can't you understand?" cried Mrs Bonsal, raising her tear-stained face, and looking at Laura with her large bright eyes. "Must I tell you in so many words; must I tell you that there is no end to the story you have just heard, because—the end has yet to come?" and once more the woman bowed her head, as though she were about to receive a blow.

Laura looked at her for a few moments in silence, with a puzzled expression on her face. Then suddenly the truth came to her like a blinding flash of light. It leapt into her eyes like fire, and flamed forth in crimson on her white cheeks and brow. Mrs Bonsal could not see her face, but she knew by the thrill that had passed through the girl's body that at last she understood.

"Laura," she murmured in a broken voice, "if I have not done right, forgive me. I have accepted your judgment. You told me that I had done right."

Laura did not answer. The colour had died from her face, and the light from her eyes. Yet the shock of what she had heard vibrated through every nerve and muscle of her body. For the moment she could not think; she could not realise her position. Tankerlane was a dim figure set afar in the darkness; the woman at her feet was a mere picture, an inanimate object in the foreground; she herself seemed to have no connection with either of them. She had been swept out of touch with all the realities. Vague thoughts and ideas poured through her brain, but, before she could grasp them, they had fled. She heard a faint sound in the distance like the moaning of the wind among trees. It was Mrs Bonsal crying softly to herself.

Then by degrees her mind seemed to focus itself, and things began to show more clearly out of the whirling chaos. She saw Mrs Bonsal, crouching like some poor suppliant, with bowed head, and eyes that dared not look at her. She moved her hands, and raised the woman's face till she could look straight into the large dark eyes.

For one brief moment the two women looked into each other's very hearts. Then Mrs Bonsal rose quickly to her feet and walked away to the window. Laura stared after her, as though she did not yet realise what had happened. And then at last she spoke.

"So—you—are—Mrs—Tankerlane," she said slowly, as if she required time to weigh the value of every word.

"I am Mrs Tankerlane," replied the other woman in a passionless voice, and without turning round.

"And I?" continued Laura, "Who am I?" She paused for a moment, and then she rose to her feet, with a look of horror on her face, and the hot blood rushing to her cheeks.

"What am I?" she cried bitterly. "Oh God, what am I?" And she buried her face in her hands, not to hide her tears, but to cover the red flush of shame.

Mrs Bonsal left the window, and, coming to her side, threw her arms about her neck.

"There is no shame," she whispered, "for you. The shame is for William Tankerlane. You are innocent enough, Heaven knows. But you had to know the truth; I had to tell it you for your own sake. You yourself said that I was right to speak the truth. Whether you love the man or not, I was right. But you do not love him; I know that you do not love him."

Laura freed herself from the woman's embrace, and laughed.

"I am glad," she cried; "I am glad! You have set me free! Thank God, I am free!"

And again she laughed, not hysterically, but rather like one whose heart is full of joy, like one who has long dwelt in darkness, and who at last has caught the first glimpse of light.

Mrs Bonsal had recovered her self-possession, and she saw that matters would have to be brought down from the dizzy heights to which emotion had carried them, and placed on the level ground of practical common sense. She realised that she had yet to complete the work that she had begun, to justify it by some definite act which would ensure a successful issue. She had set great forces in motion. It was her duty to see that they moved the life of the woman before her to some ultimate goal of happiness.

"Laura, dear," she said gently, "let us talk this matter over calmly. It is a crisis in your life. I have no interests of my own to consider. I merely want you to do what is best for your own happiness, and I will help you to do it."

She took the girl by the arm and led her to a sofa, where they sat down side by side. The sudden burst of happiness had died from Laura's face. She looked white and tired. She was calm, now that the agony of the situation was over. The storm had passed, and the sea, strewn with wreckage, was still.

For awhile they sat in silence, neither of them willing to start a conversation which, shorn of all sentiment, would bring with it a sordid and unsavoury atmosphere. Leonore, as might have been expected, was the first to speak. The whole matter had long ago been threshed out in her mind.

"We must talk calmly of this," she began, "and the less we talk of it, the better for both of us. We need not discuss the man's conduct. We have to deal with facts as they are. Now, what do you wish me to do? What do you intend to do yourself?"

"I intend to leave him," Laura replied in a hard voice. "To leave him at once, this very day. I should like to leave before he returns. I do not wish to see him again."

"That would not be just either to yourself or to him. The worst criminal has a right to defend himself before final judgment is passed on him."

"There is no defence," said Laura coldly. "There might be extenuating circumstances, but the one real fact would remain."

"It is possible," continued Leonore, "that I am not speaking the truth. You know nothing about me. Suppose that I were a mere adventuress, lying to serve her own purposes?"

"I know that you have spoken the truth."

Leonore smiled. "That is a kind sentiment," she replied, "but it is not justice; it is not the sort of justice a man would require. I think, however painful the interview may be to you, that you ought to see him."

"Very well, I will see him. It will at least give me an opportunity of—oh! how I have longed to be free, and yet—what a price to pay for freedom!" and she buried her face in her hands.

"The sting of it will pass away," Leonore replied. "The freedom will remain. But are you quite, quite sure that you wish to be free? Is there nothing that might alter your decision, nothing that would oblige you to sacrifice your own happiness in order to do that which was right? Is there nothing that might make it your duty to wait till—till you can be legally married to William Tankerlane?"

"There is nothing," Laura replied, with flaming cheeks and averted head. She understood.

"I am glad," said Leonore, and a sudden impulse moved her to fling her arms round her companion's neck and kiss her.

"I am glad," she repeated, "for a divorce would create a scandal, and it would mean more than a mere divorce. It might mean a prosecution for bigamy, and that would be terrible. As it is, we can all three go our separate ways, and the world will be none the wiser, and William Tankerlane will pass out of both our lives. I have no wish to be free. I shall never marry again. I have my art to live for. It is enough, as much as any woman can want in her life. Let William Tankerlane be judged and punished by his God."

Laura rose suddenly to her feet with a white face and blazing eyes.

"God will judge him," she cried fiercely, "for this, and for more than this, more than I can tell you, Leonore. I sold myself to him. I cannot explain, but I was forced to do it. I sold myself to him, but I little thought that I had sold my honour. Go, Leonore; for heaven's sake, leave me. Let me be alone. I cannot endure your presence a moment longer. I must be alone or I shall go mad."

Leonore rose from the sofa and laid her hand on the girl's arm. Beside the flaming beauty of Laura's impassioned face she seemed ugly and insignificant. Yet there was much strength of will and intellect in those large dark eyes.

"Laura," she said softly, "you must be calm and brave. Your nature is too noble to concern itself with revenge, which, after all, is one of the most paltry of human passions. I, too, have much to avenge. But I have conquered my feelings of resentment long ago. You must only think of the practical side of the matter. You have a long and useful life before you. You must only think of how you can use it to the best advantage."

"Words!" cried Laura fiercely. "Nothing but words. Do you think I am made of stone, that I can forget, that I can forgive, that—oh, Leonore, for heaven's sake leave me, or I don't know what will come from my lips."

"Good-bye, dear," said Leonore, kissing her gently on the cheek. "When you have seen your—when you have seen Tankerlane, come round to me. I will put you up for the night. We can then talk over your plans for the future. Good-bye till then."

Laura did not reply, but stared fixedly before her with a hard look in her eyes.

"Laura," repeated the actress firmly, "you must not let this

come between us. You must not let this worthless man affect our friendship."

"I am just beginning to realise things," replied Laura slowly, "just beginning to see how terrible it all is, how horrible it is for you to kiss me. I don't think I quite understood before. I am just beginning to see things clearly. You must go, Leonore. I must never see you again. This thing has come between us. Any friendship now would be unnatural, repulsive." Her voice was hard and cold. She did not even look at Leonore as she spoke, but still gazed past her at the door.

"Laura," replied the actress, and the single word was in itself a cry of fear, a wail of sorrow, a whisper of reproach. It vibrated like a chord of music. No other woman, perhaps, in the world could have expressed such intensity of feeling in a single word.

Laura turned her eyes on the speaker, and her lips trembled. Then the hard look died from her face and the tears came into her eyes.

"Forgive me, Leonore," she cried, "I will come with you—now, at once; I cannot face him. If I do, I will not answer for the consequences. I will come with you——"

She stopped, and both the women looked towards the door. They heard steps in the passage outside.

"It is too late," said Leonore; "I will go now. But come to me afterwards."

Then the door opened, and William Tankerlane entered the room.

CHAPTER XI

DISHONoured LOVE

WILLIAM TANKERLANE glanced sharply at the faces of the two women. Both bore traces of the storm through which they had passed. Leonore realised this, and hastened to explain.

"I was just going," she said with a smile. "I have been saying good-bye to your wife. It is too cruel of you to take her away."

"I am very sorry we have to go, Mrs Bonsal," he said, "but we shall probably have the pleasure of seeing you again."

There was a challenge in his voice, and the actress was quick to answer it.

"I shall certainly see Laura again," she replied.

"We shall be delighted to see you," he answered, but the tone of his voice belied his words.

Leonore held out her hand. "Good-bye," she said with a smile, "good-bye, Laura," and crossing over to the girl's side, she kissed her effusively on the cheek. Then she left the room.

Directly the door had closed behind her, Tankerlane lit a cigarette, and, strolling over to the fireplace, gazed thoughtfully at his wife, who was looking out of the window. He could only see the profile of her face, clear-cut like a cameo, against the daylight. It seemed almost without expression.

"Well, Laura," he said cheerfully, "this time to-morrow we shall be in London. I daresay you're not sorry to leave Paris. By the bye, I hope your friendship with Mrs Bonsal will come to an end."

She did not answer him, but still looked out of the window.

"I daresay it will cool off," he continued, "without any interference on my part. I know these violent friendships between women. They are beautiful, wonderful, while they last, but they don't last very long."

Laura turned away from the window, and, crossing over to a table, a few feet away from Tankerlane, began to turn over the pages of a magazine. The man frowned. She was behaving for all the world as though he were not in the room.

"I am sorry if you are annoyed about our departure," he continued quietly; "I can assure you that it is better for us to be in London. You can't expect me to stay in Paris all my life, because you desire the society of Mrs Bonsal."

Laura looked up from the magazine, and Tankerlane saw her eyes. They blazed like living coals, and their fire was accentuated by the calm pallor of her face.

"Why do you call her Mrs Bonsal?" she asked in a cold voice. Tankerlane laughed.

"Presumably because that is her name. Would you rather I called her Mademoiselle Jackson?"

"No," answered Laura, "I would rather you called her by her right name—Mrs William Tankerlane."

And, as she uttered the name, which, until an hour ago, she had believed to be her own, the whole expression of her face changed. A storm of passionate hatred swept across it, and it seemed like the face of another woman. She clenched her hands and trembled from head to foot. She forgot that she cared nothing for this man. She only remembered the shame he had brought upon her, the dishonour he had thrust into her pure life.

For a brief moment Tankerlane was staggered by the shock. The hour, which he had long dreaded, had come at last to him. But he quickly mastered his confusion. His strong mind re-asserted itself. He knew that he would need all his strength, all his coolness, and all his subtlety of intellect.

"My dear Laura," he said, with a laugh, "are you mad?"

"No, I am not mad," she exclaimed, "though I might have been if I had loved you. As it is, I have only to bear the shame of what you have done to me. Thank God, I never had any love for you."

"You are not yourself, Laura," he replied gently, "you have been ill. Something has occurred to upset you. That woman, who has just left, has told you some lie. Surely it is better for you to ask me for an explanation of what she has told you than to speak to me in the way you have just spoken."

His words, uttered in a dignified and reproachful voice, recalled something that Leonore had said a few minutes

previously. "That is not the kind of justice a man would require." She made an effort to calm herself.

"Give me some explanation," she said coldly. "The woman who has just left has told me that she is your wife. I have no reason to doubt her words. But, for the sake of common justice, I ask you whether she has spoken the truth or not?"

"She has not spoken the truth," he replied gravely. "You are my wife."

"I could hardly expect you to make any other reply to my question. But, for all that, you have lied to me, and I know that you have lied to me, because I know that Leonore has spoken the truth."

"That being the case," he replied sarcastically, "it was hardly necessary to ask the question."

"I can so easily find out the truth," she continued. "Leonore can give me all the details. I have only to verify them. I intend to leave you to-night. You will return to England alone. I shall stay with Leonore. I shall at once proceed to investigate the matter. If I find that Leonore has not spoken the truth, I shall return to you and ask your forgiveness. If I find that she has spoken the truth, you will never see me again."

"The inquiry is hardly likely to be conducted on impartial lines," he replied. "You have every reason for wishing to be rid of me. Under Mrs Bonsal's guidance, you will find no difficulty in coming to the conclusion which you desire."

Laura looked at him with contempt.

"I wish to learn the truth," she said quietly. "I am not looking out for an excuse to leave you. I wish to satisfy myself as to the truth. It would be no pleasure to me to do you an injustice."

William Tankerlane was silent. He had long foreseen the possibility of the present situation, and had resolved, if ever it did occur, to leave the scanty protection, which a tissue of lies would afford him, and to come out and do battle in the open. The situation had, however, been sprung rather suddenly upon him, and it was hard to make up his mind to go back on the words he had spoken in the first stress and confusion of the conflict.

Yet, if he had to confess, it would be better to confess now, than have the confession forced on him by the result of Laura's investigations. He could, at any rate, plead to her in the

name of love, ask forgiveness, point out how he had sinned through the sheer strength of his passion.

Laura watched his inscrutable face with her steady, fearless eyes, but she could read nothing of the thoughts that were passing through his brain. The long silence was becoming unbearable to a mind that was wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement. Would the man never speak? At last, when more than a minute had elapsed, she could bear the strain no longer.

"If you have nothing to say to me," she exclaimed, "I will go and pack my things. I shall leave the hotel before dinner."

He made no reply, and she moved away from him towards the door. But before she could reach it, he sprang after her and caught her by the arm.

"Laura," he cried hoarsely, "you must not leave me. I will not let you leave me."

She stopped, but she did not turn her face to his.

"I will not lie to you, Laura," he continued, "I will confess everything. Leonore spoke the truth. She is my wife."

"Please leave go of my arm," she said, "you are hurting me."

"Yes, in the eyes of the law she is my wife," he continued, loosing her arm, "but in the sight of God you, the woman I love, are my wife."

"In the sight of God?" queried Laura, turning round on him with eyes that blazed with scorn. "In the sight of God? What has God to do with our unholy union? But I am glad you have spoken the truth at last. I will wish you good-bye, here, in this room; now, at this moment. Do not let me see you again! Leave the hotel till I have gone from it! Every moment that I see you or hear your voice seems to drive me still deeper into the mire."

"You shall not go," he cried. "I will not let you go. Do you realise how much I love you?" The mask had dropped from the man's face. He was in earnest now, and the fierce hunger of love was in his eyes. The time for acting had passed. On the brink of a great crisis he bared his heart and soul to the light. No one who looked on his face could doubt that his love was fierce and scorching as the fires of hell.

"I realise what you have done to me," she replied, "to me, the woman you profess to love. I married you to gain your silence, for the sake of the man I love. Even an honourable



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marriage was a heavy price to pay. But this was not enough for you. Nothing less than my ruin would satisfy you. I hope you are satisfied. A little while ago I was an innocent girl. To-day I am the thing you have made me! I wonder that you dare to speak to me of love. The very word, as it comes from your lips, is too foul a thing for decent people to listen to."

"I love you," he said, suddenly clasping her in his arms, and drawing her close to him, "and I will not let you go. You are mine, and I will hold you fast. I have sinned against you because my love was stronger than my conscience. I wished you to be mine, and nothing else mattered. Honour? Morality? Truth? What are all these in the path of Love? Straws to be whirled away in the storm of passion, dust to be scattered to the four winds of heaven. I love you, Laurie, and nothing else matters—nothing else has ever mattered."

She lay white and still in his arms as he poured out his stream of passionate words. She did not even struggle to free herself from his grasp. All her strength seemed to have left her. His voice sounded like a distant echo. She felt the grip of his muscles like a vice, and then when the voice had died away into silence she felt his burning kisses on her lips, her brow, her neck, her cheek. And every kiss seemed to sear her soul as white hot iron sears the flesh.

"Laurie!" he cried, fiercely. "Speak to me! Tell me that you will not leave me."

The sound of Tankerlane's voice broke the spell which his furious passion had cast over Laura's mind. The blood rushed to her white cheeks, and her eyes blazed with anger. She struggled violently to free herself from his strong arms.

"No, Laurie, no," he cried hoarsely; "you shall not leave me. You are mine, Laurie, mine"; and he kissed her passionately again and again, on lips and cheeks and forehead.

"You coward!" she screamed. "Oh, God will kill you, will strike you dead!" She had lost all control of herself, and scarcely knew what words had come from her lips. But every word struck home to Tankerlane's heart.

The passion slowly died from his face, and a hard look came into his eyes. Then he let go of the girl, and walked away from her. She flung herself on the sofa, and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed piteously.

He turned round, looked at her for a moment, and then,

walking over to the door, locked it, and placed the key in his pocket.

"Laurie," he said gently, when he had returned to her side.

She did not move nor answer him. But her body quivered at the sound of his voice, as though he had struck it with a whip.

"Laurie," he continued, "forgive me. I did not know what I was doing. I love you so much. I cannot lose you. The violence of my passion carried me away, made me forget. I have been a brute. But I wish to put things straight. I wish to do what is fair and honourable. Will you talk over matters quietly with me?"

The man's voice was tender and broken with emotion. He stood before her like a guilty criminal pleading for his life. But she did not answer him.

"Laurie," he cried fiercely, "I do not plead to you in the name of love; that would be useless, for you do not love me. I only want to do what is best for you. Will you listen to me, and discuss matters calmly? I only wish to do what is right."

Laura raised her tear-stained face from the cushions of the sofa, and looked at him with fear and loathing in her eyes.

"There is nothing to be said," she replied mechanically.

"There is much to be said," he retorted. "Let us put the question of love aside. I only wish to consider your position."

Laura rose to her feet with an ugly look on her face.

"My position," she said coldly, "is the one you have placed me in. Does it give you any satisfaction to talk about it?"

"I wish," he answered humbly, "to make amends."

"There is nothing to be said," she cried, turning away from him, "nothing to be done. I do not wish to hear you. I am going to leave you now, and I hope that I shall never set eyes on you again. Every minute I stay in this room is a fresh stain on my good name. I will leave here at once."

She walked across to the door, and, turning the handle, shook it violently. Then she came swiftly back to Tankerlane, and her eyes blazed with anger.

"Give me the key of that door," she cried, "or I will ring the bell."

The man's face hardened and his mouth closed like a vice.

"Give me the key of that door," she repeated, "unless you wish us to be the talk of the servants in the hotel."



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"You will not dare," he replied firmly; "you have some pride, some respect for yourself."

"I have no pride, no respect for myself. I know well enough what I am—what you have made me. Give me the key of that door."

"For God's sake be calm, Laurie," he exclaimed. "I wish to put things straight. All the world believes you to be my wife. No one need ever know the truth. Leonore will not speak. She does not love me. She is fond of you. She will not speak, for your sake. She has no wish to obtain her rights."

"How dare you!" she cried. "Give me the key of that door—at once, or I will rouse the whole hotel."

The girl's gentle face was transfigured with passion, and no one who had seen her at that moment would have recognised the cold and courteous Mrs Tankerlane. Her cheeks flamed crimson, her hands were clenched, and there was a light almost of madness in her eyes. Her body trembled from head to foot, and the veins stood out on her forehead. If a weapon had been ready to her hand she would have used it, for she had lost all control of her reason.

"Hush, Laurie," the man replied in a firm voice, "you know I did not mean that. We can be married. A divorce can be easily arranged. I was married in America, and divorce excites no comment there. No one will hear of it. Then we can be married in a registry office, and the world will know nothing, save that we are still man and wife. There will be no scandal. Your reputation will have no slur cast upon it. I am sure my wife will agree to an arrangement of this sort. She will be glad to be free." And he laughed bitterly.

"And I, too, am glad to be free," cried Laura; "ay, glad—from the bottom of my heart. Give me the key of the door, and let me out of my prison."

The man's eyes flashed dangerously. So far he had controlled his temper, and had assumed the position of a suppliant. But he could restrain himself no longer.

"I am sorry I have wasted my pity on you," he said coldly. "I only wished to do what was right. I wished to keep your name unsullied. I love you and desire to shield you from harm."

"I have no desire for your pity or your protection," she retorted hotly. "You have acted like a blackguard, and my only wish is to be rid of you."

"If freedom is all that you wish, it is easily granted. Here is the key of the door."

He held out the key, and she took it from his hand.

"I do not know what your plans are," he said quietly, "but I presume we both return to England as unmarried people, and all this is to be a blank in our lives."

"It is to be as though it had never been," she answered, moving towards the door.

"I have dared all to gain you," he continued. "I have counted honour as nothing. I love you still, and though I have given you your freedom, I will still fight to bring you back to me. So long as I am alive, Laura, I shall try to conquer you. You cannot escape from me. Remember that John Shil's life is still in my hands."

She turned round on him with a look of terror.

"You do not mean it," she faltered; "you could not be so vile. You swore on the Bible, you swore to keep silence."

"Ay, so long as you agreed to live with me. I think those were the very words."

She came a step towards him with piteous entreaty in her eyes.

"You could not so dishonour yourself," she said, in a trembling voice, "after what has happened, after I have paid such a price for your silence."

He looked at her face, and for the first time during their interview felt the sense of real power. This woman was still in his grasp, and he could crush her. Yet even this pleasant thought was shadowed by the knowledge that his hold over her was due to her love for another man. He was silent, wondering to what heights of heroic sacrifice her love for John Shil would carry her brave soul.

"After all I have suffered," she continued. "Look at me now. You know to what depths of shame you have thrust me down. I have given myself to save him, and you speak as though—oh, Heaven, I will kill myself if you tell what you know! I will kill myself."

"Even that would be better than your marriage to John Shil—ah, that is what is in your mind. Do you think I cannot read it? But I would rather see you dead than the wife of that man."

"His wife?" she cried bitterly. "Do you think that I could ever be the wife of any man—now, and least of all the wife of a man I honour—and love."

"John Shil's life is in my hands," he said thoughtfully. "If you leave me, you release me from my oath. I am at liberty to tell what I know."

"You would not do it," she cried, clasping her hands together in an agony of fear; "you could not—after what has happened."

"I don't say that I shall do so, but that I am at liberty to do so. I have been released from my oath. I have not made up my mind what to do."

"Promise me—before I go, that you will be silent."

"I shall promise nothing," Tankerlane replied coldly, "save this—that, if you remain with me as my wife I will be silent."

"It is impossible. I will not sell myself. There are limits to the sacrifice a woman can make—even for the man she loves."

"That is the only promise I can make, Laura. I would consider the matter calmly, if I were you. You have everything to gain by doing as I wish, everything to lose by leaving me."

She came close to him, with clenched hands and a face white with fear and anger.

"I will lose everything," she said hoarsely; "but if any harm comes to John Shil——" She left the sentence unfinished. In her blind wrath she could form no definite threat, no clear scheme of retaliation. She only knew that she would fight for the man she loved. Tankerlane laughed.

"I am not afraid of you, Laura," he replied.

She turned away from him, and, crossing to the door, unlocked it. Then she looked back at the man who had ruined her life.

"A few months ago," she said slowly, "I was a young and innocent girl. I was incapable of doing harm to anyone. You have sown the seeds of evil in my nature. Perhaps one of these days you will reap the harvest you have sown."

She opened the door, closed it behind her, and William Tankerlane was alone. The battle was over, and he had failed to achieve a victory.

He had used every weapon at his disposal, and they had all broken in his hand.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEETING OF THE WAYS

ONE Sunday afternoon, nearly two months after Laura had parted from William Tankerlane, Leonore Jackson was holding one of her informal receptions in her apartments in the Champs Elysee. Her salon had already become one of the fashionable centres of Paris. The little actress had, to use the words of one of her most fervent admirers, "struck it at last, and struck it very rich indeed." In no city of Europe does talent command such unqualified success as in the gay capital of France. In other great centres of civilisation wealth and rank have more claims to attention than the mere hall mark of genius. But in Paris the artist can hold his own against the highest and richest in the land, and Mademoiselle Jackson was able to command as brilliant a circle of acquaintances as the Duchess of Bruges herself.

She could, at least, flatter herself that her success was due almost entirely to talent. Unlike many famous actresses, she had more to offer the public than a beautiful face. She was, indeed, plain-featured and insignificant. The men who admired her were not of the class that is attracted by the perfect figure and lovely face of some ballet-girl, thrust into eminence by her physical charms and the value of her jewellery. They were men of mark. Leonore's sex meant little or nothing to them. They realised that a new star had arisen on the theatrical horizon, a star that would not grow dim with the passing away of youthful charms, and they did homage to its brilliance.

It was a triumph of pure talent, and, if any proof of this were required by the cynics who believe that no woman can command real admiration except by virtue of her sex, it was to be found in the significant fact that among Leonore Jackson's

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most fervent admirers were women of every class. The great lady of the Champs Elysées and the struggling little artist of the Quartier Latin both thought Leonore Jackson one of the most charming women in the world.

Hence it came about that the Sunday afternoon receptions in the house of "La P'tite Jackson," as Paris still called her, were extremely popular, and, as a rule, the rooms were overcrowded.

This particular afternoon was no exception to the rule. The grand salon, a room nearly forty feet square, was inconveniently full of people, and a large number of men had to stand from the time of their arrival to that of their departure. Leonore was in her element, brilliant and vivacious; she moved from one little group to another, and the magic charm of her personality pervaded the whole room.

Shortly after six o'clock, when most of the guests had departed, a newcomer was shown into the room. He was a tall, thin man of distinguished appearance, with iron-grey hair, moustache, and imperial, and his pale, inscrutable face marked him as one who was accustomed to conceal his thoughts and emotions. He was, in fact, no less a personage than Sir Harry Baxendale, the English Ambassador in Paris.

All eyes were turned on him as he entered, for though Sir Harry's face was well known, he was rarely to be seen in literary or artistic circles, and his presence at Leonore's house was a compliment of the highest order. She moved forward to meet him with a smile of triumph on her face.

"Ah, this is good of you, Sir Harry. I hardly hoped you would come."

He took her outstretched hand, and bowed stiffly.

"I am honoured," he said in a quiet, even voice, "and I have ventured to extend your invitation to a friend who wished to meet you."

"He is welcome," replied Leonore, "but I do not see him."

Sir Harry Baxendale looked at his watch.

"He will be here in a few minutes," he said. "He could not come with me. His name is John Shil."

"Shil? Shil?" repeated Leonore. "I don't know the name. What has he done?"

Sir Harry Baxendale smiled.

"Nothing much at present," he replied; "a month ago he was an obscure land agent. To-day he is one of the richest men in Europe. He proposes to do a great deal."

"Oh, a rich man," said the actress, with a laugh; "how uninteresting! There are so many of them. What has he made his money in?"

"He has not made it," replied Sir Harry; "the money was left him."

"Oh, that is even more prosaic," said Leonore. "A man who makes a lot of money must always command a certain amount of respect, however dull and uninteresting he may be; but a man who merely inherits it—well——" And she shrugged her shoulders scornfully.

"My father was rich," the Ambassador replied, "and I—well, you must not be too hard on men with money, Miss Jackson. But I think you will find this new millionaire a very interesting fellow. He is here in Paris on business, but he wishes to meet everyone worth knowing, and I told him that you——"

"That will do, Sir Harry," interrupted Leonore, with a smile; "compliments are not allowed in artistic circles. We make it a rule to say unpleasant things to each other, and only praise people behind their backs."

"We do just the reverse in diplomatic circles," replied Sir Harry; "but, as no one believes anything that is said, no harm is done. Ah, here is Shil. I am sure you will like him."

Leonore's eyes were turned to the open door, and she saw a tall, broad-shouldered man looking round the room, as though in search of someone. His face was hard and lined, for many years had passed over the head of the young land agent in the last few months. When he saw Sir Harry Baxendale, he came forward with the mere ghost of a smile on his lips.

The Ambassador introduced the young man to his hostess, and after a few words of general conversation left them, and went to another part of the room to talk to a famous English novelist.

"I have been anxious to meet you," said John Shil quietly, when they were alone. "I am so glad that I was able to get an introduction to your house."

Leonore gave a sharp glance at his face. She was used to little speeches of this sort, but, as a rule, they were uttered in a very different tone of voice; and the look in John Shil's eyes did not suggest any attempt at a compliment. She smiled courteously.

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"I am very pleased you have come," she replied. "I am always glad to meet English people, though I am, as you know, an American, and the English are our rivals in Paris. The French have not yet decided which of the two nations spends most money in their beautiful capital." She laughed merrily, but there was no answering smile on John Shil's face. His thoughts seemed to be far away, and a faint flush came into Leonore's cheeks. His inattention showed a lack of good breeding, and "La P'tite Jackson" was not used to the company of men who paid no attention to her. She made a quiet resolve to bring this hard-faced millionaire into the ranks of her admirers, and then show him his proper place—at the foot of the lowest rank of all.

"Shall we sit down?" she said, after a short pause.

"Yes," he replied abruptly, and then, realising the rudeness of his reply, he smiled. "I beg your pardon," he added. "I should have said 'Thank you' or 'I should be delighted.' You must excuse my manners, Miss Jackson. I have had—I still have—a good deal of worry and anxiety. I cannot help thinking of things that I certainly ought not to think about when I am talking to you. Let us sit down. I very much wish to have a chat with you."

Leonore smiled with genuine pleasure. Her opinion of the man underwent a quick and remarkable change. He had, to some extent, opened his heart to her, a complete stranger. His words flattered her vanity. It was evident that he had discovered something in her nature that appealed to him, some evidence of womanly sympathy, some genuine worth in her character. No man speaks to a woman in the way he had spoken unless he has a high opinion of her, unless he wants advice or help. She moved towards a large sofa, which stood in a corner of the room, and seated herself at one end of it. John Shil followed her and took his place, not at the other end of the sofa, but rather close to her side.

For a few moments neither of them spoke. Then Shil looked at the actress's face, and, as though reassured by what he found there, broke the silence.

"I have particularly wished to meet you," he said abruptly, and then he paused, as if uncertain how to proceed.

"I am flattered," replied Leonore quietly, but without a trace of either sarcasm or coquetry in her voice.

"I understand," Shil continued, "that you know a very

large number of English people in Paris. I have been looking for someone—a lady. It is possible you might have met her. I have reason to believe that she is, or was, in Paris. I have advertised in all the papers. The English Ambassador himself has given me all the assistance in his power. I have made inquiries everywhere, but I have heard nothing.”

He spoke quickly and earnestly, and an eager look came into his hard face. Leonore noted both the look and the almost passionate note in his voice. Her curiosity was aroused. She did not, as a rule, take much interest in the troubles of strangers, but the man’s face attracted her in some way that she could not clearly define, and she was pleased at the idea of being possibly able to give him some assistance.

“Paris is a large place,” she replied. “But I should think if you went to the police——”

“I have done that, of course,” he interrupted roughly. “Everything that money can do has been done. I feel that I must trust to chance. It is just possible that I may meet someone who can help me. The lady’s name is Vane, Miss Laura Vane.”

“Laura Vane,” she repeated thoughtfully. “No, I certainly do not know anyone of that name.”

“It is possible that she has changed it,” he continued.

“By marriage?” queried Leonore.

“No!” he answered fiercely. “Certainly not by marriage. But she may have assumed some other name.”

Leonore noted the hungry, passionate look on his face, and knew well enough that John Shil was in love with the woman he was seeking for. She also knew that he would resent any reference to this obvious fact.

“I know several people of the name of Laura,” she said after a pause, “but they are all, with one exception, married women.”

“And the exception?” he asked eagerly.

“She is fifty-six years of age,” she replied with a faint smile, “and she is the manageress of a society——”

“That would not be Miss Vane,” Shil broke in with some vehemence.

“I thought not,” Leonore said drily. “But perhaps—if you would describe the lady.”

John Shil gave a halting description of Laura Vane. Like most men, and all lovers, he was totally unable to give an



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accurate picture of the woman, whose features were as familiar to him as those of his own face. But before he had finished his weak endeavour to portray the vision that was in his mind, Leonore's face grew very grave, and her eyes were turned away to a group of visitors who were preparing to depart.

"You will excuse me," she said, rising to her feet. "I will return to you in a moment." She crossed the room, chatted a few minutes with her guests, and then, when they had departed, returned to John Shil, accompanied by Sir Harry Baxendale.

"Sir Harry is obliged to go," she began.

"You needn't come, Shil," the Ambassador interrupted. "In fact, I would rather you didn't come. You couldn't accompany me further than the door."

"Yes," Leonore added, "there is no need for you to go, Mr Shil."

John Shil looked round the room, and saw that everyone else had gone. His British ideas of propriety were battling with his desire to continue his conversation with Leonore. But he was not long in making up his mind.

"I will stay a few minutes, Miss Jackson," he said, "that is to say, if I don't bore you. I am rather interested in the matter we were discussing."

Sir Harry Baxendale smiled.

"Ah, you young folk," he said. "I envy you your interest in words; I don't think I ever really enjoy a conversation. It is always my business to detect the falsehood, which, to us, is inseparable from speech."

With the utterance of this cheerful sentiment, Sir Harry Baxendale departed, and Leonore was left alone to John Shil.

"Well, Miss Jackson?" he said eagerly, "to resume our conversation—did my description—have you ever met anyone who might—who might——"

Leonore interrupted him with a laugh.

"My dear Mr Shil," she said, "all I have gathered from your description is that the lady is very beautiful, and that she has auburn hair. Now if you had a photograph."

For reply John Shil pulled out a small leather case, and, opening it, gazed silently at its contents. And, as he looked, even Leonore, who knew nothing of the story of his life, felt a great pity for the sorrow that was written in every line of his face.

"Miss Jackson," he said humbly, "I feel that you are

a good woman, or I should not—I should not show you this—all that is left to me of the woman I—of the woman I want to find.”

She took the picture from his hand, and carefully scrutinised the features of Laura Vane. They needed no such scrutiny on her part, for the photograph was a faithful likeness, and a mere glance was sufficient to reveal the identity of the woman John Shil was looking for in Paris.

But Leonore required time to think. In the first shock of the discovery she could not decide whether to tell the man the truth or to lie boldly. It would be hard enough to tell this ardent lover that Laura was the wife of another man, almost impossible to tell him that she was the man's mistress.

Then there was Laura herself to be considered. Would Laura wish this man to know the truth? Who was he? What right had he to ask about her private affairs?

With these doubts and difficulties in her mind, Leonore did not dare to speak or raise her eyes from the portrait to John Shil's face. At last, however, her long silence aroused the man's suspicion.

“Well, Miss Jackson?” he queried sharply. Leonore, forced to reply, resolved to temporise.

“I seem to know the face,” she replied, but without taking her eyes off the photograph. “It is possible that I have met her somewhere. Have you any reason to suppose that she has been here—in Paris?”

“I have every reason,” he answered; “she cabled to me from Paris about two months ago.”

Leonore was silent, and still gazed at the photograph.

“Tell me the truth,” he exclaimed roughly. “You know her. You have met her—here, in Paris. For God's sake tell me the truth, Miss Jackson.”

Leonore raised her eyes, and saw the agony on the man's white face and the eager desire on his trembling lips. She felt that she would require all her strength of mind to resist his pleading. She resolved to let him know part of the truth.

“I have met this lady,” she said slowly, “and here, in Paris. She has been in this very room. But she did not call herself Laura Vane.”

John Shil rose to his feet, and his lips opened, as though to frame some question. Then he turned abruptly, and, walking over to the window, looked out into the street.

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"Mr Shil," said Leonore gently, "this interview is very painful to you, and also to me. I think that it had better come to an end."

John Shil turned on her fiercely, and threw all courtesy to the winds.

"You said just now," he exclaimed, "that you only knew one unmarried woman in Paris of the name of Laura—a woman of fifty-six. Is that the truth?"

"It is certainly the truth," Leonore answered coldly.

"What did Miss Vane call herself?"

"Please recollect, Mr Shil," she replied, "that you are a stranger to me, and that I am not in the witness-box."

"I humbly beg your pardon," he said gently. "But please tell me this. Did you know this lady's name was Laura?"

Leonore hesitated. She saw the purpose of the question, and all the answer would imply.

"I must know," he cried savagely. "I must know."

Leonore's pity for the man gave place to a natural irritation at the tone of his voice.

"Her name was Laura," she answered, rising to her feet. "Mr Shil, this interview is at an end."

"Thank you," he replied in a low voice; "I understand. Miss Vane is married."

Leonore shuddered as she looked at his face. She felt half inclined to ring the bell for a servant, but she was a brave little woman, and decided that she could deal with her visitor in a more gentle manner.

"Mr Shil," she said, coming close to his side, "I am very, very sorry for you."

"Her name?" he asked hoarsely. "What is her husband's name?"

"I don't think I need answer that question," Leonore replied. "It would do you no good to know her husband's name. It might do her a great injury."

"I insist on knowing."

"Again I must remind you, Mr Shil, that I am not in the witness-box. I am very sorry for you, but I cannot excuse your rudeness."

"Can you tell me where she is—where they are?" he continued, without heeding her rebuke.

"I cannot," Leonore replied sharply. "I have not seen the lady or her husband for more than two months, and have

not heard from either of them. I have no idea where they went to when they left Paris. It is probable that I shall not meet either of them again."

John Shil was silent. He did not believe that she was speaking the truth. But, distraught with pain and anger, he was at a loss how to acquire the knowledge he desired. He only knew one thing clearly, that he was likely to gain nothing by prolonging the interview.

"Please leave me, Mr Shil," Leonore said, after a pause.

The young man looked into her face. It was not a beautiful face, but it had a singular charm of its own. It was, moreover, the face of a good and clever woman. And, as he looked at it, a sudden idea came into his mind, and, as it grew more definite, he smiled and held out his hand.

"Forgive me, Miss Jackson," he said softly. "You must make allowance for my conduct. I have behaved like a cad. I am not myself. But still I should have known better than to offend a lady who has taken so kindly an interest in a stranger's affairs. Let us part friends, at any rate. I should like to feel that you thought well of me."

Leonore smiled, as she took his outstretched hand. "I forgive you," she answered pleasantly, "and I am very, very sorry for you. But I think I am right in taking the line I have adopted. And may I give you a word of advice before you go. I am not very old, but I have seen a great deal of the world, and I speak from bitter experience when I advise you to take no further steps to discover Laura—Vane. A meeting between you can only be painful to you both. She has passed out of your life; she is married——"

"Is she happily married?" he interrupted sternly. "Is her husband kind to her? Does he love her? I know that she does not love him. She cannot be happy."

"Thrust all thought of her out of your mind," Leonore continued, "that will be best and wisest. Good-bye, Mr Shil. I shall always be pleased to see you, but on one condition only, that you do not refer to this matter again."

"I will observe the condition," he replied with a grave smile, "and I shall certainly come to see you again. Good-bye, Miss Jackson, and thank you—for your forbearance."

When he had left the room, Leonore flung herself into an arm-chair by the window, and, lighting a cigarette, relapsed into a very unpleasant train of thought. Her mind went back to her last

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interview with Laura, when the latter had learnt the terrible truth from her lips. She had not seen Tankerlane's victim since that afternoon. Two days afterwards she had called at the hotel, and both the man and the woman had departed without leaving any directions for the forwarding of letters. She could not even guess at the result of Laura's interview with William Tankerlane. It was possible that she had left him; it was also possible that she had reviewed the situation more calmly, and had decided to make the best of an unholy bargain in order to conceal her shame. In this respect Leonore was as much in the dark as John Shil. She was not surprised that she had received no communication from Tankerlane, but she was much hurt at Laura's silence.

The appearance of John Shil had introduced a new and puzzling factor into the problem that had often presented itself during the last two months. As Leonore sat in the window, gazing into the busy street below, and seeing nothing of its life and gaiety, she tried to recall her conversation with Laura, in the hope of discovering some reference to the man who so evidently loved her with all his heart and soul. She could, however, only fix on one clue to the place he occupied in the story. Laura did not love William Tankerlane. Was it possible that she loved John Shil, and, if so, why did she marry Tankerlane? Leonore found no solution to the problem. But she resolved to see more of John Shil, for whom she had already conceived a considerable liking, and to remove the condition she had placed on their further intercourse.

It was characteristic of the woman that she gave no thought to her own position as the lawful wife of William Tankerlane. Her mind was entirely occupied with the affairs of Laura and John Shil. She sat by the window till it was dark, and the lights peeped out all along the wide street. And as the darkness came over the fair city, a deep shadow drifted over her thoughts—the shadow of some great and unknown disaster. And in that darkness there were no lights at all.

CHAPTER XIII

WEAVERS OF WEBS

WHEN John Shil returned to his magnificent suite of rooms in the Hotel Bristol, he poured himself out a strong brandy and soda, and drained it to the last drop. Then, with unsteady hands, he lit a cigar, and puffed at it furiously, till half the room was hidden in a blue cloud of smoke.

Before two minutes had elapsed, he had bitten off the end of the cigar, and had thrown the piece into the fireplace. He felt in his pocket for a pipe, filled and lit it, and gripped the hard vulcanite with his teeth. Then, flinging himself into an easy chair, he stared at the ceiling, and tried to control the wild thoughts that coursed through his brain.

In time everything resolved itself into one solid fact. Laura Vane, in spite of all her protestations of love, had not remained true to him, and was now the wife of another man. His mind reverted to the day she had told him she could never be his wife, to the long slopes of the Stonewold Hills, sparkling in the sunlight, to the heart-breaking sound of her voice as she told him that she could never be his wife. He saw, as in a dream, the little village of Laverstone, grey and clear-cut beneath him, the thin lines of smoke rising in the frosty air. He even thought he could hear the distant bark of a dog, and the rattle of his horse's hoofs, as the animal pawed the iron ground with impatience. It all came back to him with horrible reality. At that time—in the bitter hour of parting—he had not realised what it all meant. He could not understand why Laura had refused to marry him, although she loved him. Now he knew the truth. She was married to another man—a man she did not love.

The news of her disappearance from Laverstone had come to him in the person of old Sam Vane himself. The distracted



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father, when he learnt that his daughter had never reached her aunt's house, and when all inquiries had failed to produce any information beyond the fact that the girl had arrived safely at Paddington, had come straight to his daughter's lover, and had taxed him with knowledge of her hiding-place.

John Shil well remembered the painful scene that had followed. The old man's feeble fury, the white face and trembling hands, the hot words of accusation, the indignant denial, his own horror at the news, his offers of help. How clearly it all stood out on the pages of his life!

And then, scarcely a fortnight afterwards, had come the cable from America telling him that his cousin, William Shil, of Pittsburgh, was dead, and had left him a large fortune. He remembered how bitterly he had laughed when he first heard the news. The money had meant little or nothing to him. He was earning a good income, and was able to gratify most of his simple wants. But in a few days his views on the matter had undergone a marked change. He had realised, on reflection, that this money would place in his hands a great power, to be used either for good or evil. It would, above all, enable him to prosecute his search for Laura Vane by every means in the power of mortal man.

During the last six months he had spent money like water. All the great detective agencies of Europe had been placed on the track of the missing girl. Advertisements had been inserted in hundreds of newspapers. John Shil himself had travelled from place to place, making personal inquiries, and following clue after clue, till each thread had snapped in his hands.

And then more than four months after Laura's disappearance had come the telegram from Paris. He took the piece of paper once more from his pocket, and the words danced before his eyes as he read them for the hundredth time.

"Please do not continue search for me. I ask this for my own sake and yours as well.—LAURA."

She had evidently seen one of his advertisements, and had hastened to check him in his search. How obscure the words had seemed when he first read them! How clear they were to him now! In the light of the information he had extracted from Leonore Jackson, it was quite evident why Laura did not wish him to continue the search for her.

He looked at the telegram for a few moments with tears in

his eyes. Then his grief suddenly gave way to anger—to blind, unreasoning fury. He rose to his feet with a savage oath, and, crumpling the piece of paper in his hand, tore it into fifty pieces and scattered them on the floor.

"I will find them," he muttered. "By Heaven I will find them, and then I——" He paused, and clenched his powerful fingers into the palms of his hands, as though he were choking the life out of some living thing.

"She shall pay for it," he cried, "and he—ah, the man—I wonder, I wonder."

He paced up and down the room, his face white with fury, and every muscle in his body tense and trembling. Then suddenly he stopped, as though turned to stone, and stood as motionless as a statue. Then he broke into a laugh.

"Of course! Of course!" he muttered. "Ye gods, what a fool I have been!"

He looked at his watch, crossed quickly over to the fireplace, and rang the bell. A man servant entered, and stood by the door, awaiting orders.

"I am going to England, Jenkins, by the next boat. Pack my things at once. You can come with me. I shall not give up these rooms. Hughes must stay here."

"Yes, sir," the man answered; "but if I may venture to suggest, sir, you will be too late for the night boat, sir."

"Get along, and do as I tell you. We go to-night. There are special trains to be had, and a special boat, if the other has gone. I'll give you ten minutes."

When John Shil reached Calais, the night boat had left. But he chartered a steamer, and was in Dover an hour after the boat train had steamed out of the station. A special train took him to London, and he reached Charing Cross at seven o'clock.

Before that evening he had found what he wanted in the records of Somerset House. He had scarcely dared to hope that Tankerlane had been married in his own name. But there it stood out, bold and clear, for all men to read. William Joyce Tankerlane, married to Laura Vane on January 21.

He obtained a certified copy of the marriage certificate, and, returning to his hotel, tried to decide on some definite course of action. His first impulse was to go down to Laverstone, and interview Sir Robert Tankerlane; his second to wire the news to Sam Vane; but after a careful consideration of the consequences attending either of these proceedings, he resolved

to keep his secret to himself for the present, and devote all his energies to finding William Tankerlane and his wife.

His mind at once reverted to Leonore Jackson. He believed that she knew more than she cared to tell about Tankerlane's movements, and he determined to drag the truth from her by fair means or foul.

He left that night again for Paris, but, before he reached Charing Cross, he called in at a telegraph office, and despatched the following message to Sam Vane:—

"Have heard news of Laura. Don't worry. All is well. Will send for you directly I have seen her.—JOHN SHIL."

He thought it would be a kindly act to send this message to a heart-broken old man. It did not commit him to any definite statement, and it would bring some small ray of light into a mind that was groping and pitifully crying out in the darkness.

But John Shil had much else to think of that night—so much that he did not sleep at all on the journey from Calais to Paris. The train spun on through the darkness, the darkness paled to grey dawn, and then the sun flushed the flat plains into a sea of green and gold. But still the young millionaire stared out of the windows, and saw no more in the sunlight than he had seen in the shadows of night—only the white face of Laura Vane, as he had seen it on the slopes of the Stonewold Hills, with love in the dark eyes, and sorrow on the trembling lips.

When John Shil reached the Gare du Nord, he drove straight to his rooms, had a cold bath and some breakfast, and then quietly thought out some means of inducing Leonore Jackson to tell him all that she knew about the Tankerlanes.

His feverish madness of the night before had vanished and left in its place an almost unnatural calm. His mind was clear, and, for the time being, devoid of emotion. From the wronged lover, hot with rage and distracted with the violence of his feelings, he had passed into the calculating schemer, the man of business, who has something definite to do, and who has to think out the best way of doing it.

He smoked for half an hour after breakfast, and then wrote two notes. The first was addressed to a Monsieur Flamieu, 36 Rue d'Or, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR SIR,—I should be glad if you would make inquiries at all the hotels in Paris, and find out where a Mr and Mrs

Tankerlane have been staying. They left about two months ago."

The second was to Leonore Jackson, and was equally brief and to the point:—

"DEAR MISS JACKSON,—I should like to call on you this afternoon at three o'clock. Please let me know by bearer if you can see me.—Yours sincerely, JOHN SHIL."

He sealed up the envelopes, wrote the word "urgent" on both of them, and rang the bell.

"Deliver these notes at once, Hughes," he said, when one of his servants appeared. "And wait for an answer at Mademoiselle Jackson's house."

In an hour's time the man returned with a note. Shil tore it open, read the contents and smiled. Leonore Jackson had consented to see him.

At three o'clock to the minute he was shown into the large salon. It was empty, and he walked round the room, looking at the pictures, books and ornaments, and trying to form some opinion of the character of the woman who owned them. John Shil was actuated by no idle curiosity when he took careful note of his surroundings. He was planning a campaign, and even the smallest item of information about his adversary was likely to be of service to him.

Leonore Jackson kept him waiting for twenty minutes, and at the end of that time, he had formed a rough estimate of her character. She was, without doubt, a woman of taste, with a leaning towards the sentimental in art and literature. She was vain, not with the vanity of a beautiful and foolish woman, but with the quiet strength of a proud and self-reliant mind, conscious of its own value. On one of the tables lay a handsome quarto volume, bound in morocco, by Rivière. On its pages were the signatures of the greatest Frenchmen of the day, and each one of the writers had signed his name to a few words of eulogy. A humble woman would have kept such a book in her private boudoir. But it occupied a conspicuous place in Leonore's salon. It was placed where visitors could not help seeing it, and with its binding of green and scarlet and gold it would have been conspicuous in any room.

Lastly, John Shil came to the conclusion that Leonore, like most actresses, was fond of admiration, and the good opinion

of other people occupied a very high place in her estimate of what is really worth having. The room was literally strewn with tributes of admiration from men who appeared to worship her genius. Princes, statesmen, authors, artists, musicians, even philosophers and divines, had vied with each other in presenting her with costly trifles. It was clear that she was a woman of importance, and she did not hide the fact from the world.

As John Shil was examining a curious Louis XIV. snuff-box, presented, as the inscription on the lid testified, by no less a person than the President of the Republic himself, Leonore entered the room.

"Yes," she exclaimed gaily, as she came towards him, "is it not beautiful? Of course I don't take snuff; but it does for anything."

John Shil laid down the box and held out his hand.

"Lucky woman," he said with a smile, "you seem to have all the world at your feet."

She took his outstretched hand and laughed.

"It is well to make hay while the sun shines," she replied, "in a month, a week, perhaps to-morrow, my sun will set, and a new light will come up on the horizon. And then, *Pauvre P'tite Jackson!*"

"That is the fate of professional beauties," he said gravely, "not of genius. But I can imagine that it is—possible to get tired of all this," and he included the whole roomful of presents in a slight motion of his hands.

"Yes," replied Leonore slowly, "I suppose it is possible to get tired of anything—but please sit down, Mr Shil. You marked your letter 'urgent.' You did not come here to talk to me about my little souvenirs."

She threw herself into a deep, high-backed chair, which seemed to engulf her tiny body, and Shil took a seat by her side on a particularly uncomfortable chair of the Louis Quinze period.

The woman, who was a little irritated by the adroitness with which Shil introduced one subject after another, was the first to come to the point.

"Well, Mr Shil," she said, taking advantage of a momentary pause in the conversation.

He did not answer, but gave a swift glance at her face. He did not pretend to misunderstand her question.

"What have you to say to me?" she continued.

He looked on the ground for a moment and then smiled.

"I am really afraid to say it," he replied, "after what you said to me the day before yesterday, and after my promise—but if you will, for a few moments, release me from that promise, I assure you that I will not be guilty of any discourtesy."

Leonore frowned slightly, and was silent.

"I am quite calm," he continued, "but I have something to say of importance. Believe me, I am quite calm. I am not going to shout or be melodramatic. I only want to tell you something that I should like you to know."

"Very well, Mr Shil," she replied; "I will listen to you."

"Since I last saw you," he began, "I have been to London and back."

He paused, and Leonore looked at him with interest.

"Yes," he continued, "I have been to London, and I have found out the name of the man."

"I might just as well have told you," said Leonore. "Of course directly you knew that she was married——"

"Yes, of course, of course," he went on hurriedly; "but don't imagine, Miss Jackson, that I have come here to triumph over you. On the contrary, I have come in a spirit of deep humiliation. I only wished you to know that I have learnt the truth, so that you may feel that you have nothing to hide from me, and when we meet, we can be good friends."

"Is that all you wish to say?" she asked, with a glance of suspicion at his face.

"Yes," he replied, "only that. I shall, of course, have no difficulty in finding William Tankerlane. His family are well known to me. I was his father's land agent for some years."

"And you intend to find him?" asked Leonore, examining a gold and tortoise-shell paper-knife which she had picked up from the table.

"It would do no good," he replied quietly. "It would do no good, Miss Jackson."

His voice was low-pitched, but it had in it the ring of hopeless despair. Leonore looked at his face, calm and rigid, with never a twitch of the muscles or movement of the flesh to betray what was passing in the man's mind. His eyes were fixed on the carpet, and she could not see them, else she might have learnt that the calm voice and the impassive face concealed a fury that burnt like the fires of hell.

"It would do no good," she replied slowly. "Please do not

try to find them." There was a note of fear in her voice. She knew the wrong that William Tankerlane had done to Laura Vane. John Shil still supposed that the woman he loved was Tankerlane's wife. Leonore knew enough of the man before her to guess what would happen if he learnt the truth. She had already seen his blazing eyes, his flushed cheeks, and his clenched hands. She told herself that if ever the two men met and the truth were known, one of them would die.

"I shall try and forget," John Shil said abruptly, after a long pause. "I must find something to occupy my mind."

"Fall in love with another woman," said Leonore with a smile, "then you will soon forget."

"In love?" he queried sadly. "No, I am afraid, Miss Jackson, that——"

"Oh, it is easy enough," she interrupted; "you have no idea how easy it is if one only tries. I once had to try and forget. Look at me now—'La P'tite Jackson,' without a care in the world!"

He raised his eyes and looked at her face, bright and vivacious—the face of a woman who enjoys life to the full. Then he laughed and rose to his feet.

"I won't bore you any longer, Miss Jackson," he said. "All is plain and open between us now. I have much to thank you for. Perhaps—some day—I will follow your advice, I will forget; but at present——" He shrugged his shoulders and held out his hand. Leonore shook it with more warmth perhaps than was necessary.

"You will come again," she said softly, as he reached the door.

"Yes," he replied, "I will come again."

When he had gone, Leonore reseated herself in the big arm-chair and knitted her brows in thought.

When half an hour had passed by, she rose to her feet, and, walking slowly over to a large mirror, she regarded her own image earnestly.

"If I could make him fall in love with me," she said to herself, "he would forget—and it would be for his own good, and for the good of Laura. And it might even amuse me. Who knows?"

Leonore herself certainly did not know. But the Fates, spinning their webs in silence, knew well enough, and they smiled.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GREAT GAME

Two months passed by, and Leonore's engagement at the Colonnade Theatre was drawing to a close. An eminent dramatist had completed his English version of the play, and La Petite Jackson had accepted an offer to play the same part in London.

During these two months John Shil had obtained no news of Laura or William Tankerlane. Monsieur Flamieu had easily carried out the task entrusted to him. But subsequent inquiries made at the Hotel Imperial produced no definite information.

With the aid of a well-filled purse, John Shil learnt that Madame Tankerlane had left the hotel first, and then Monsieur Tankerlane had departed about three hours afterwards with the baggage. Neither, so he gathered from his informant, appeared to have been in the best of tempers. No one knew where they had gone, and, owing to the time which had elapsed between their departure and the commencement of the search, all clues had vanished.

John Shil, however, still clung to the idea that Leonore Jackson knew where the Tankerlanes had taken up their residence, and he was a frequent visitor at her house. His attitude towards her was that of an admirer, and Paris had already begun to talk of the young Englishman's infatuation for the talented actress. He was playing a desperate game, and was not over particular in his methods. A little admiration, a little love-making, a well-simulated tenderness in the voice, an ardent light in the eyes, what were all these but means that were justified by the end in view. He was determined to get Laura's address, and he realised that he had first to win Leonore's confidence.

Leonore, on the other hand, had her own game to play, and, as it so happened, her plans exactly dovetailed with those of the man she wished to bring to her feet. She had resolved to make John Shil fall in love with her, and he appeared to be doing so at an almost alarming rate. The very clumsiness of his acting deceived her. A consummate actress herself, she looked upon his awkward advances as bearing the hall-mark of sincerity. The situation contained all the elements of a delightful comedy. Here were two young people, both for reasons of their own, pretending to be in love with each other, and each under the impression that the other was falling a victim to the wiles and arts of love. Great issues were at stake, but they remained hidden in the background. The scene itself was pure comedy.

And comedy it remained until one evening a few days before Leonore's departure from Paris. Then the grinning mask was torn away, and the stern features of a grim tragedy were exposed to view.

Leonore had finished her dinner, and was enjoying a cup of coffee and a cigarette in the drawing-room. In her hand she held the English version of the play which had made her famous, and was smiling at the dexterity with which the adapter had altered certain scenes to suit the more sober taste of an English audience. Then suddenly, like a whirlwind, her maid burst into the room with a newspaper in her hand.

"Marie!" said Leonore sharply.

The girl stopped, white-faced and trembling. Then she dropped the paper, and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed bitterly.

"What is it?" exclaimed Leonore, rising to her feet. "What has happened?"

"Oh, madame, oh, madame!" the girl moaned, "the paper—it is there!"

Leonore picked the paper off the floor, and glanced through the columns. The girl shrank towards the door as though anxious to escape.

"What's all this nonsense?" exclaimed the actress. "Where is it? I can't see anything there—take it," and she thrust the pink sheet into the girl's hand.

"Oh, madame, oh, madame!" whimpered Marie, fumbling with the sheet of paper. "It is here, see!"

Leonore looked at the place indicated by her maid, and her face grew white as she read the headline—

SERIOUS ACCIDENT TO AN ENGLISH MILLIONAIRE.

For a few moments the black lines of the newspaper danced and swerved in a white mist that had floated across Leonore's eyes. Then, with an effort, she recovered herself and commenced to read the short paragraph which followed the startling headlines.

"A serious accident occurred this afternoon to Mr John Shil, a well-known English millionaire, as he was crossing the Avenue de la Grande Armée. A motor bicycle, driven, we are assured, at twenty kilometres an hour, collided with the unfortunate gentleman and hurled him against a tree. The victim of this criminal act of carelessness is suffering from overexposure of the brain, and lies in a most serious condition. The rider of the machine escaped with a few bruises, and has been placed under arrest. We should not have been sorry if he had broken his neck. Our streets are as perilous as the track of a railway, and it is high time that something was done to ensure the safety of pedestrians, who, at any rate, have a right to exist."

Leonore stared at the few lines of letterpress as though she did not understand their meaning. Her face was very white, and the newspaper trembled in her hands.

Then there was a knock at the door, and a spruce little man in the uniform of the gendarmerie was shown into the room. He passed cap in hand, and bowed.

"You will pardon my intrusion, madame," he said quickly, "but Monsieur John Shil—he is a friend of madame, I believe. The unfortunate gentleman——"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Leonore angrily. "I know all about it. It is here in the paper. It happened at 3.15 this afternoon. It is now nine o'clock. You have been a long time in coming. How is he? Has he sent for me?"

"Alas, no, madame! He has not yet spoken, but we found madame's name among his papers, and as it appeared that——"

"I will come with you now," she interrupted. "Marie, get my opera cloak—the one lined with sable—and you, sir, if you would be good enough to order a carriage."

"It is at the door, madame."

"Very well, I will be ready in a minute."

In less than a quarter of an hour Leonore had reached the Hotel Bristol. The injured man, who was known to be enormously wealthy, had been taken to his own apartments, and one of the most famous doctors in Paris had been summoned. As Leonore entered the sitting room, the great physician was giving some orders to a nurse. He scarcely glanced at the newcomer, though politeness exacted from him a bow of recognition.

When the nurse had disappeared through the door leading to the bedroom, the doctor came forward with a smile of welcome.

"It was good of you to come, madame," he said quietly.

"How is he?" she exclaimed. "Is he badly hurt? Is he in danger? Can I do anything, monsieur? Can I help? Can I nurse him?"

"My dear madame," he replied with a grave smile, "you overwhelm me with questions. Pray do not alarm yourself. He has had a marvellous escape."

"Escape?" she cried. "Ah, then he is safe! Oh, thank God!"

For the moment she forgot she was not alone, and the cry of her heart rose unchecked to her lips. Then she remembered, and shrank from the questioning look in the doctor's eyes.

"I am an old friend of Mr Shil's," she said hurriedly. "I am so glad to hear that there is no danger."

"I did not say so, madame. I only expressed surprise that he was not killed on the spot."

"Ah, then, you think—you fear——"

"I fear nothing, madame," he said sharply. "My business is to fight, not to fear. But there is no need for you to be anxious. Monsieur is suffering from concussion of the brain. Otherwise he is unhurt. He is young and very strong. He will have the best of care and attention."

"Yes," cried Leonore eagerly, "I am sure he will have that. May I see him? I should like to see him if I may."

"Certainly, certainly. Of course, you know he is still unconscious."

"I know, but I should like to see him."

The doctor opened the door leading into the bedroom and stood aside for Leonore to enter. When she had crossed the

threshold, she paused, and half closed her eyes, as though afraid of what she might see.

But the pause was only momentary. She moved forward a few paces and then looked boldly at the white expanse of bed.

It was nothing so terrible after all. Just a white, motionless face, swathed in bandages that were scarcely whiter than the flesh. The outline of a body beneath the white coverlet. The subdued gleam of an electric lamp covered with a green shade. The dim figure of a nurse in the background. Absolute silence, save for the heavy breathing of the injured man, and the faint ticking of a watch which lay on the dressing-table.

That was all, and yet for Leonore it was enough to reveal that which had hitherto lain deep in the silence of her own heart.

There, in the semi-darkness and the hush of the sick-room, the truth broke out like lightning, and the crash of its thunder echoed and re-echoed in her ears.

Leonore Jackson, the great actress, had played one of her parts too well. The play had passed into an actual drama of her own life. She had simulated love with the most exquisite grace and tenderness. And now, in the silence of that darkened room, she knew the truth. She loved John Shil, and his life had become part of her life. If he died, the world itself would crumble into the dust and ashes of death.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE DEEP SHADOWS

"THIS ain't no bloomin' catch, I can tell yer. I ain't wot yer'd call an 'ard-earted woman, but I ain't no phillernthruppist, and don't yer forgit it."

The speaker, a stout, untidy woman of forty-five, folded her thick bare arms and glared defiantly.

"I am so sorry, Mrs Blurton," Laura Vane replied gently, "but I will certainly let you have something on account this week."

"I've 'eard that tale before," said Mrs Blurton unsympathetically, "and you 'aving the best bedroom and all, and the use of this 'ere sitting room, which, tho' I sez it meself, there ain't a finer apartment in Widley Street, nor sich furnitoor, nor sich pictures, nor sich a view out of the window."

Laura glanced at the hideous oil painting of the deceased Mr Blurton, almost life size, and inexpressibly brilliant in colouring, and then turned her weary eyes to the window. The outlook was not cheerful, but it was a relief to the sight after the glare of Mr Blurton's pink flesh. A patch of bare earth, roadlike in colour and quality, stretched for a few feet to a dingy brick wall. Beyond that lay a hundred yards of naked meadow, strewn with every conceivable specimen of battered iron and broken crockery. Beyond that again a stretch of brown mud, and then the broad line of the River Thames, grey and sullen in the light of a December afternoon.

Laura's eyes rested gratefully on the red sails of a barge, the one beautiful thing in a wilderness of ugliness.

"It is indeed a charming room," she replied with a faint smile, "and it is very good of you to let me use it, Mrs Blurton."

"And it'd be very good of yer to pay me now and then, Mrs Danby," the woman replied, mimicking Laura's voice, "just as a matter o' form like."

"I do all I can," the girl said in a low voice. "I work hard all day. But they don't pay much for making blouses. I just get enough for food, and the baby—he is ill; I can't leave him."

Laura's voice quavered, and she looked away from Mrs Blurton to hide her tears.

"Yer shouldn't 'ave babies if yer can't afford to keep 'em," Mrs Blurton said roughly. "I ain't 'ad but one, and my 'usband was a man of persition. He could earn 'is thirty-five shillin' a week, 'e could—ay, and drink twenty-five of it 'imself—like a lord."

Laura did not answer, and her silence seemed to infuriate the warlike Mrs Blurton. Perhaps the latter expected some envious reference to the wage-earning powers of her deceased husband.

"Well-spoken girls like you," continued the inexorable Mrs Blurton, "'ave friends wif money, unless they're ashamed to go to 'em. I may be a common woman, but I'm an honest woman, and I ain't ever done anyfing as I'd want to 'ide from my friends."

Mrs Blurton's broad, moonlike face glowed with pride and indignation.

Laura rose sharply to her feet with hot cheeks and flashing eyes.

"How dare you?" she cried. "How dare you speak to me like that? I will leave here at once—now, to-night."

Mrs Blurton betrayed no anger at this sudden outburst. On the contrary, she seemed rather pleased that she had at last been able to produce some effect with her bitter tongue.

"Oh, yer'd leave, would yer," she said in a pacified tone, "and where'd I get my money, and where'd yer go, and what'd 'appen to the inncerent child, as ain't done no 'arm to me nor nobody else?"

"There's the workhouse," cried Laura vehemently; "I shall at least be free from insult. I can go there to-night, and the child——"

She paused with a look of fear. Her brief show of spirit died away as she thought of the child, barely two months old. With a cry of anguish she flung herself down on a chair, and, burying her face in her arms, wept bitterly.

A softer look came into Mrs Blurton's face as she watched the effect of her insults. She was not a bad woman at heart, and remarks that might be accounted brutal in a higher walk of life were everyday pleasantries in Widley Street. She moved forward ponderously, and laid one huge hand on Laura's arm.

"There, there, my gal," she exclaimed roughly, "don't take on so. Yer'd better stay 'ere. I've cut a bit rough about the money, for I wants it cruel bad; my own life 'aint all lavender, that it 'aint. Your son 'aint been in jail, 'ave 'e? He 'aint broke 'is muvver's 'eart yet, 'as 'e? No, bless 'im; and yer a lucky woman for that. My own lad—there, there. We all 'ave our troubles, and yer'll pay me this week, won't yer? for I wants it cruel bad, I do."

"Yes," sobbed Laura faintly, without raising her head from her arms.

"And yer'll not take on so 'bout wot I sed to yer?"

"I know you don't mean it," said Laura, wiping her eyes with a mere speck of a handkerchief. "I can't forget all you've done for me, Mrs Blurton. You have been very good, very patient."

"But yer'll pay me this week, won't yer?" exclaimed Mrs Blurton, coming back to the main point, "and yer'll write to yer friends, and tell 'em 'ow yer situate, and 'ow I'm an honest widdler and virtuous, too, in spite of all temptations and Mr Bagson, and as 'ow I've waited and give yer the use of a room, wiv pictures and a view, which, though I sez it myself, ain't got the like of it in Widley Street—and as 'ow——"

"Yes, yes, Mrs Blurton," Laura broke in hurriedly, "I'll get the money somehow. I have been selfish. It has never struck me that you yourself—why, you always look so well-to-do and prosperous."

"Yus," the landlady rejoined savagely, "that's the wust of bein' stout, one get's no sympathy. But yer'll pay me this week, won't yer?"

"I have promised to do so," said Laura, with quiet dignity.

Mrs Blurton turned and shuffled ponderously over the oil-cloth towards the door.

"If yer find it cold in 'ere," she said kindly, "go in the kitchen. We can't afford more'n one fire in the 'ouse. I'll 'ave a look at the child for yer, and yer'll write that letter, won't yer?"

Laura did not answer, and Mrs Blurton, taking her silence

as consent, closed the door behind her. The sound of her slow and heavy footsteps down the passage seemed to reverberate through the house like thunder.

Laura Vane rose to her feet, and, unearthing an ornamental ink-pot from the depths of a thick woollen mat, set it on the table. She then found an envelope and a piece of paper, both grey with dust, and yellow with age. Then she discovered that the ink in the pot had long since dried into a hard black crust, and, taking the stump of a pencil from the mantelpiece, she sat down and stared at the piece of paper.

Mrs Blurton's brutal language had driven the truth home. It was clear, for the child's sake, that she must write to someone and appeal for help. But to whom? To William Tankerlane? To John Shil? To her father? To Leonore—wife of the man who had betrayed her?

The problem that confronted Laura Vane was not intricate, but it was inconceivably difficult to solve. It presented a choice of evils. There were only four people to whom she could apply for help in her present crisis, and she was loth to meet any of the four, much less to ask a favour of them.

First there was William Tankerlane, the father of her child, the one man who was obliged, and who would be glad to help her in her trouble. It was not till a month after she had left him that she had realised the truth so glorious in the case of most women, so terrible in her own. Even then she had been sorely tempted to return to him. But after a severe mental struggle her hatred of the man had conquered, and she had kept silence and hidden herself still more securely from him.

She realised to the full what the birth of the child meant in the struggle to free herself from William Tankerlane. It was an additional weapon in his hands, which he would not fail to use, if he once learnt of its existence. Even now, with no persuasion on his part, Laura found it hard enough to avoid returning to him. She knew that he would welcome her to his arms, and that their reunion would restore her to the world, from which she had hidden herself in shame. All would be well if she returned to William Tankerlane. The child's struggling life, which the smoky air of London and the bad food were choking from its frail little body, would be saved. She herself would once more take her place among the women of her own class. Her future life would be lightened by every

In the Deep Shadows

III

luxury that money could purchase. She would be esteemed, honoured, even envied. All would be well, save one thing—she would be tied to the man she hated most of all the men in the world.

And this one thing stood up before her as a wall of stone, over which she dare not attempt to climb. She fingered the notepaper nervously, and even went so far as to address the envelope. But the man's name on the dirty paper brought home the truth to her, and she tore the envelope into a dozen pieces. She knew that the thing was impossible, that she could not make the sacrifice, so long as any other way out of her difficulty remained to her.

Then there was her own father, who was still waiting for her return. He was ignorant of all that had happened since she left Laverstone. An application to him would mean an interview. She would have to explain; she would have to lie. There would be the child—a fact from which he would draw his own conclusions. It would break his heart; it would probably kill him. He would have pity on her, and help her, and take her in his arms. But the truth would kill him. And he, too, would persuade her to marry William Tankerlane. No, she could not go to her father. She would at least spare him the shame of knowing the truth. She would spare herself the sorrow of refusing to obey him.

Then there was John Shil, the man she loved, the man to whom she could have looked for aid and guidance in any other difficulty than the one which confronted her. But he also—so she believed—was in ignorance of all that had happened to her. It would be impossible to tell him the truth. She foresaw, as Leonore had already foreseen, that, if John Shil once knew the truth, he would not rest till he had come face to face with William Tankerlane.

There would be a fight—a fight perhaps to the death. John Shil was a man of quick temper and violent passion, possessed, too, of enormous strength. In the blindness of his fury he would see nothing but the destruction of the man who had ruined her life. He would not pause to think, to argue, to listen. He would strike.

And Tankerlane, if he left the hands of his adversary alive, would remember nothing of oaths and promises. He would tell all that he knew about the death of Ben Holland.

No, it was clear that the truth, apart from the shame of

telling it, must never reach the ears of John Shil—for the sake of the man himself.

Then, lastly, there was Leonore, her friend, but still the wife of William Tankerlane. Laura's mind with regard to Leonore had assumed a definite attitude on the night she left the Hotel Imperial in Paris. She had decided that any further attempt at friendship would be impossible. Her own self-respect, shattered enough, Heaven knows, but still alive, forbade further intercourse with Leonore. And so when she left Tankerlane she went to another hotel, and did not even accept Leonore's invitation to spend the night at the latter's apartments.

This same mental attitude remained unshaken. It would be impossible for herself and Leonore even to be friends again. The very idea of friendship was repugnant, loathsome, horrible.

To one of these four people Laura would have to apply for pecuniary assistance. They would all gladly respond to her appeal. Yet honour or self-respect, or decency, prevented her from writing to anyone of them.

An hour passed, and still Laura sat at the table with her pencil, and still the sheet of notepaper before her lay blank and unsullied save by the yellow finger of time. She could not solve the problem that confronted her, and yet it had to be solved. She had been driven into a corner, and there was only one way out of it.

It was a pretty problem for a philosopher, for a student of the moral and mental forces which mould the destiny of man. Considered in the abstract it was full of subtle difficulties, and would have been a joy to Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. But, considered by a woman, half distraught with grief and fear, it was a cruel dilemma.

Laura's long, weary attempt to decide on the least unpleasant way out of her difficulties was interrupted by the hurried entrance of Mrs Blurton.

"Now don't 'e be alarmed, Mrs Danby," she began roughly. The tone of her voice was in itself a note of alarm, and Laura rose to her feet with a look of fear.

"What has happened?" she exclaimed. "What is it, Mrs Blurton?"

"There ain't no cause fur alarm, I tells yer; but 'e's took worse, 'e 'as; now ther's——"

But Laura waited to hear no more. She brushed past Mrs Blurton's portly body and ran up to the small dingy bedroom, where the sick child lay, black-faced and gasping for breath.

A single glance at the child told her that he was in need of urgent remedies, but she had had little experience of childish ailments, and was ignorant of what she ought to do. She leant over the little body in an agony of fear, and then, running to the door, shrieked out for Mrs Blurton.

But the landlady, who had followed her as fast as her size and age would permit, was already halfway up the stairs.

"Don't 'e be alarmed," she said breathlessly, as she entered, "e'll be orl right. I've give 'im some good medicine."

"Medicine?" queried Laura quickly. "What is it? When did you get it?"

"I 'ad it for my 'Enry, when 'e was about your kid's age. I allus keeps medicine and saves doctor's bills. It's been well corked for twenty years."

"Twenty years!" cried Laura, in horror. "Oh, run for the doctor, please, Mrs Blurton, quick. He is dying."

"Just yer run along yerself," answered Mrs Blurton; "I'll look after 'im."

"I can't leave him. I won't leave him. He may die while I'm away. Oh, please go, please!"

"'Old yer noise," said Mrs Blurton, catching her roughly by the arm. "'Now look 'ere. You ain't no earthly use 'ere. Jist yer cut along. Yer can run, if yer don't know anything 'bout kids. Jist cut along, sharp."

Laura hesitated for a moment, and then, realising the force of the landlady's remarks, she leant over her sick baby, kissed him, and hurried out of the house without waiting to put on her hat.

When she had found the doctor, and obtained his promise to come round to Widley Street at once, she hastened on to the nearest post office and dispatched the following telegram:—

Miss Leonore Jackson,
Regal Theatre, Haymarket.

Please call to see me to-morrow morning, most urgent —
LAURA, 37 Widley Street, Deptford.

She re-read the words, pencil in hand, and then, thinking the name was too indefinite, she added "Tankerlane" to her

Christian name. Then she scratched it out, and substituted Vane. Then it occurred to her that the name Vane might convey nothing to Leonore's mind, and she once more replaced it with Tankerlane. She had no right to the title, but it would serve to identify her.

She opened her purse, found a shilling in it, and, handing the telegram over the counter, received three half-pence change. It was all the money she had left in the world.

Laura had been forced to a definite decision at last. All arguments, all question of morality or self-respect or decency, had been swept away by the tumultuous torrent of her grief. Her child was dying, and she had done the only thing that it was possible for a mother to do.

CHAPTER XVI

THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

LEONORE's Parisian success in the part of the Comtesse de Larnac had been repeated in London. The English version of the play, inevitably weakened by the toning down of its more salient features, had proved itself exactly suited to the tastes of a London audience. The adaptor had done his work with masterly skill. He had kept one eye on the Censor and the other on the requirements of the *blasé* man about town. He had ruthlessly cut out all the words and actions which had found favour with the French, and left in their place a suggestion of words unspoken and of deeds unperformed. Paterfamilias, that great hypocrite of the present age, was pleased and chuckled. His daughters did not understand, and their innocence remained unsullied.

Leonore herself had taken her place in the very front rank of the actresses of the world. Certainly no other woman had yet achieved such an unqualified triumph in two languages. Society had opened its doors to her. More than one duchess had left cards at her house in Pont Street. She was asked everywhere, and even that exclusive section of society, which lies so far above what is known to the papers as the "smart set," had shown a disposition to approve of her general life and character. She stood, like another great actress of our time, far beyond the reach of scandal. Her quiet, well-ordered life was an example of how well and truly a woman may conduct herself, even in the face of every temptation to do otherwise.

A week after Shil's accident in Paris, she had been obliged to come to London for rehearsals. But during that week she had seen as much of him as was possible under the circumstances. The knowledge that she loved him was not altogether pleasant to her. It was one thing to play at love and quite

another to experience the reality of it. She had ceased to be the actress, and the natural reserve of the woman had replaced her fictitious demonstration of affection. A feigned emotion is always more pronounced than a real one, and now that Leonore knew the truth, she was at great pains to conceal it.

John Shil had not been able to leave his room for several weeks, and he did not return to England until three months after Leonore's departure. Directly he came to London, however, he called upon her. His resolve to find Laura had only been strengthened by his illness. Lying on his bed of sickness, he had had a great deal of time to think about her. His enforced inactivity had been irksome to him, and directly he was well enough to resume the search, he entered upon it with furious energy. He was still convinced that Leonore knew where Laura was to be found, and he hastened to renew the acquaintance which had progressed so favourably in Paris.

During the four months which followed his arrival in London he saw a great deal of Leonore Jackson. The task that he had set himself to do was not altogether a distasteful one. He was, indeed, more than a little ashamed of the rôle he had assumed. But, on the other hand, Leonore was a talented and charming woman, and he found a real pleasure in her society. He never referred to Laura in her presence, but he always kept his eyes and ears open for anything which might hint at some communication between the two women.

However, he learnt nothing, and he was, moreover, a little puzzled at Leonore's attitude towards him. In Paris she had met all his advances halfway. She had appeared—to use a common, but forcible expression—to be flinging herself at his head. But here, in London, her manner had undergone an entire change. It was cold, reserved, almost repellent. He did not understand. He had mentioned the fact more than once in a jocular, good-humoured sort of way, and she had laughed at him. But he was intelligent enough to see that something had come between them, something that he could not comprehend.

The idea sometimes occurred to him that she had fallen in love with some other man. But gossip, which is always busy about the affairs of those who occupy high places, had never coupled her name with that of any one of her numerous admirers. And his own personal observation had failed to discover anything of the sort. Of course, it did not occur to

his blunt masculine intellect that she had fallen in love with himself. A woman, versed in the ways of her sex, would have learnt the truth at once. A man could only come to one conclusion—that he had incurred her displeasure.

It was left to chance to lay bare the secret which the woman had contrived to hide so carefully in her heart, and chance or the unalterable law of the universe—call it which you will—had ordained that John Shil should call on Leonore on the very morning which followed the receipt of Laura's telegram.

Laura's telegram arrived at the Regal Theatre shortly after the rise of the curtain on the first act. Leonore had only had just time to read it before she was called on to the stage. But in the first interval she sent off a reply to the effect that she would call at Widley Street about twelve o'clock on the following morning.

For the rest of the evening she was the Comtesse de Larnac, and her mind was so occupied with her part that she could scarcely give Laura more than a passing thought. But when she returned to the house in Pont Street she thrust aside all recollection of the play and began to ponder over the startling news contained in the telegram.

Laura was evidently in need of help, or at any rate of some friend who could give her advice and sympathy. It was also pretty certain that she had left Tankerlane. Leonore was not well acquainted with London, but she knew that Deptford was hardly the sort of place that her husband would choose to live in, unless he had fallen on evil days. It was possible, however, that Laura, who wished to hide from her friends, might select a neighbourhood where she would not be likely to meet any of them.

Leonore slept but little that night. Her sympathy for the troubles of another woman was mingled with some anxiety as to the part she herself would have to play in the matter. It was not at all to her interest that Laura should leave Tankerlane, and she had resolved to do all in her power to keep John Shil from meeting the woman he had once loved so well. At first the resolve had been the result of her desire to do the best she could for the benefit of others. It was now strengthened by a determination to act for her own happiness. So long as Laura Vane was free to marry John Shil, so long would she prove a dangerous rival. Leonore flattered herself that she intended no disloyalty to her friend. The circumstances of

the case were such that it would be a kindness to keep Laura Vane and John Shil apart.

At half-past ten the next morning the footman brought up a card, and Leonore frowned as she read the name. She did not wish to see John Shil at that particular moment. But she could hardly refuse him an interview. He had probably called on some matter of importance. Men do not pay society calls at half-past ten in the morning.

"Tell Mr Shil I will see him," she said to the servant, and then she turned to an elderly lady, who had looked up from her perusal of the *Times* with a frown on her wrinkled forehead.

"Dear Mrs Audrey," she said with a laugh, "please don't be shocked. I know the hour is unconventional. But it is probably something of importance."

Mrs Audrey rose to her feet, and laid aside her spectacles. A faint flush came into her aristocratic old face. Although her duties were those of a paid chaperon, she was genuinely fond of Leonore, and the actress repaid her affection by treating her with almost filial respect. Never for a moment was Mrs Audrey allowed to feel that she was in a position of dependence.

"My dear," she replied gently, "of course I am not shocked, but I think you see too much of Mr Shil. People have already begun to talk, and I am not at all sure that he is sincere in his attentions."

"I hope he is not," Leonore retorted sharply. "I am sure I do not encourage his visits."

Mrs Audrey looked keenly at the speaker's face, and smiled. She had already grown suspicious of Leonore's marked coldness towards John Shil.

"Very well, my dear," Mrs Audrey said meekly, "only I think you had better tell him not to call so often. It only excites comment, and it is impossible to be too careful. You will forgive me speaking to you like this, Leonore, but I am an old woman, and it is the privilege of age to give advice that has not been asked for. And you know, dear, that I have your happiness at heart."

For reply Leonore went up to the old woman, and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Then John Shil entered, and shook hands with both women. A few general remarks passed between the three, and Mrs Audrey, seeing from the expression on the man's face that

she was not wanted, found an excuse for leaving the two young people alone together.

"Well?" said Leonore coldly, when Mrs Audrey had departed. "What brings you here at this early hour?"

"I must apologise," he replied, "but I wished to see you before I left London. I am going down into Essex to-day, and I wished to say 'Good-bye' to you, Leonore."

"I am sorry you are going," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. "But I have asked you not to call me by my Christian name."

John Shil frowned, and bit his lip with vexation. Then he laughed good-humouredly.

"I know you very well," he said apologetically.

"Too well," she replied, looking away from him. "You come here too often."

"You did not object to my visits in Paris."

"Things are different in Paris," she said. "We are in London, and people are more inquisitive in London. I think it is quite as well that you are going down into the country."

"I am obliged to you for the thought," he retorted sharply. "I come here often, because I enjoy your society, because I like to see you. Is there any harm in it?"

Leonore shrugged her shoulders, and, walking over to a table, took a bunch of violets from a vase, and began to pick off the heads of the flowers.

"Is there any harm in it, Leonore?" he repeated, following her to the table, and standing close by her side.

She did not answer him, but she ceased to pluck off the heads of the violets, and stood motionless. Her heart beat very fast, and her face was very white, but he could not see these signs of her emotion.

"Surely it is an innocent amusement," he continued. "I do nothing to injure your reputation. I think much of your sympathy—of the kindness you have shown me, of——"

She turned round on him with blazing eyes, and he shrank from the look in them.

"Sympathy?" she said in a cold voice that contrasted strangely with the passionate expression of her face. "Kindness? Yes, I have been too kind, too sympathetic. I have done my best to make you forget Laura Vane—the woman who has thrown you over for another man. But you have not forgotten her. The mere mention of her name sends the

blood to your cheeks. One has only to look at you now—oh, you poor, weak fool, why can't you be strong enough to forget?"

John Shil gazed at her in amazement, and a sudden fear came into his mind. There was something in the woman's face that even the forced coldness of her voice could not entirely conceal. Had he played the game too seriously? Had he made this woman love him? If he had done this, he had passed all the limits of honour and morality. He saw himself as a contemptible scoundrel.

"I have forgotten her," he replied mechanically. "Laura Vane is nothing to me. And I—am grateful—to you for what you have done—for having made me forget her."

Leonore laughed bitterly, and then, crossing the room to a small writing-table, she unlocked the drawer and took out Laura's telegram.

"You say that Laura Vane is nothing to you," she said quietly; "you say that you have forgotten her. I have here a telegram which I received from her last night. It contains her address."

For a moment John Shil stood motionless. His face was very pale, and there was a fierce, hungry look in his eyes as he gazed at the piece of paper in Leonore's hand.

"Well?" said Leonore coldly, as she observed the expression in his eyes. "Do you not wish to read it?"

"Her address?" he said in a low voice; "then you have known it all the time. You have kept it from me."

"I knew it for the first time last night," the woman replied; "but even if I had known it all the time, would it not have been right of me to keep it from you? Laura is the wife of another man. It is best that you two should never meet again. It is the only thing that will ensure your happiness. You yourself have realised that; you yourself have said, 'Laura Vane is nothing to me; I have forgotten her.'"

There was a ring of sarcasm in Leonore's voice as she uttered these last words, and a look of scorn on her face as she watched the countenance of the man she loved.

For a few moments, indeed, John Shil's thoughts were plainly written on his face. His first impulse was to spring forward and snatch the telegram from her hand. His second to ask for it, to plead for it, and give the lie to his own words. But he restrained himself and kept silence. Leonore had been a

good friend to him, and he did not wish to lose her friendship. He saw the possibility of obtaining the information he desired without asking for it. He was silent, and then, realising that even his silence was eloquent, he spoke.

"You are quite right," he said in a voice that was almost unnaturally calm. "Please forgive me for suggesting that you kept this information from me. I am sure you did nothing of the kind. But even if you had done so, you would have been quite right. It would have only been done from the best and kindest of motives. I do not wish to know Laura's address. But I should like to know if she is well and happy."

Leonore was silent, but she still kept her eyes on the man's face. It would be easy enough to tell John Shil that Laura was both well and happy, and there the matter would have come to an end. But Leonore's desire to do the right thing, and to act for the happiness of her two friends, had already given way to more selfish motives. For the first time in her life she was jealous of another woman, and her jealousy stung her to madness. She resolved to find out once for all whether this man still loved Laura Vane.

"Is she well and happy?" John Shil repeated in a voice that he meant to express a merely polite interest in a friend's welfare.

"No," Leonore replied, "I am afraid she is neither well nor happy. She is in great trouble, and she wishes to see me at once."

"In great trouble?" he said mechanically. "Laura in great trouble?" He paused, and then, as though annihilated by a swift and stupendous blow, his self-control was shattered, the mask on his face was broken, and his naked soul stood out with nothing to conceal it from the woman who faced him.

"By God," he cried, "if he has made her suffer, if he has ill-treated her, if he has harmed a hair of her head——" and then he stopped, shamed for a moment into silence by the piteous look in Leonore's eyes. But the man was unable to regain control of his feelings. His brain was in a fiery tumult, and his whole body quivered with passion. He had cast prudence to the winds of heaven. He could think of nothing but Laura, in pain, in sorrow, in sickness. All else had faded from his mind.

"If he has wronged her," he cried passionately, "I will kill him. Give me that telegram, quick. I will go to her now—at once."

He stepped forward a pace, and held out his hand. His face was flushed with excitement, and he spoke thickly, like a man under the influence of alcohol.

Leonore looked him steadily in the eyes. "It is quite evident," she said quietly, "that Laura Vane is nothing to you, and that you have forgotten her."

"Give me that telegram," he repeated; "for pity's sake give it to me."

"If Laura had wished to see you, she would have sent for you. But she wishes to see me. Apart from my own feelings in the matter, I am bound to respect her confidence."

"For our friendship's sake give it to me," he pleaded.

Leonore did not answer, but she crumpled up the telegram into a little ball and clutched it tightly in her hand. John Shil came to her side, and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Leonore," he cried, "I implore you."

She did not answer, and the touch of his strong fingers tightened into a grip of steel. She knew well enough what was in his mind. He intended to take the telegram from her by force if she refused to give it to him.

"Please leave go of my arm," she said in a low voice, "you are hurting me."

For a moment he hesitated, and then the finer part of his nature prevailed. He loosed her arm, and, walking over to the other side of the room, turned and confronted her with a hangdog look on his face.

"Forgive me," he muttered hoarsely, "I did not mean to hurt you. I lied to you when I said that Laura was nothing to me. She is still the woman I love."

"I knew that you lied to me," Leonore replied. "I have known all along why you pretended to be—to be my friend. No actor that I have ever met could have played the part to greater perfection. But I knew that you were acting."

Her voice was clear and firm, but her lips trembled and there were tears in her eyes. Her face, however, was turned away from John Shil.

"Acting?" he stammered lamely. "I do not understand, Leonore."

"Yes," she replied, "I think you understand." Then she raised her eyes and looked him in the face.

"Good-bye," he said simply, not even daring to hold out the hand of friendship.

She did not answer, and turned her back on him. He hesitated for a moment and then left the room.

John Shil understood. The truth had been written plainly on Leonore's face. He knew that the game had been carried too far, and that there was a stain on his honour as a gentleman.

Leonore stood motionless as a figure carved out of stone. She heard John Shil's footsteps as he crossed the room, and heard the click of the door handle as he grasped it in his fingers. She could hardly restrain herself from turning round and crying out to him. She longed to tell him to stay with her; to tell him that she would forgive everything if he would only ask for forgiveness; to implore him for some explanation, for a denial of the charge she had brought against him, even to say "good-bye" and clasp his hand. Anything would be better than this silent parting, this breach between two friends who might never meet again.

But her womanly pride put a seal upon her lips, and bound her limbs so that she could not move. Motionless and silent, she heard the door open and close, and not till John Shil's footsteps had died away in the corridor outside did she turn her head.

For a few moments she stared at the closed door, as though it shut out the gladness of life and all the joys of the earth from her longing eyes. Then she crossed to the window, and, leaning over the sill, looked down the street. But when John Shil appeared, she withdrew her head and shoulders, lest he should look up and see that she was watching him.

Then she slowly unfolded the crumpled telegram, and smoothed it out carefully between her finger and thumb. She had to see Laura that morning. She did not know exactly where Deptford was, but it was certainly a long way from the West End, and it would probably take two hours to reach the place. Laura was in great trouble and required immediate help. It was no time for idle dreams and vain regrets.

Yet Leonore lingered and frowned at the telegram in her hand.

"Why, after all," she said to herself, "should I help this woman, who stands between me and the desire of my heart? If she is suffering, let her suffer; if she wants advice or help, let her cry out for it in vain; if she is near to death, let her die."

CHAPTER XVII

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

FOR a little while Leonore was tempted to disregard Laura's telegram. She was smarting under a cruel blow. She had not wept, or cried out, but the whip had cut into her flesh, and she ached with pain. It was only natural that her mind should be embittered, and that she should turn a deaf ear to her rival's appeal for help.

But such thoughts cannot remain for long in the mind of any good woman. Leonore roused herself from her brief spell of madness, and her cheeks grew hot with shame, as she realised to what depths she had fallen. She crossed the room and rang the bell.

"Get me a hansom, please," she said to the maid who answered her summons. "As quickly as possible."

But the hansom waited ten minutes at the door before Leonore was ready to start. She was a clever and strong-minded woman, but she was not free from the weakness of vanity, and she was particularly careful of her appearance that morning. She was well satisfied with herself as she looked in the glass. Her tastes in dress were quiet, but magnificent. Everything she wore was simple and very costly, for she bought all her things at the best shops in Paris—perhaps the most expensive in all the world.

The drive to Deptford was a long one, and she had plenty of time to think over her own position in regard to Laura and John Shil. She did not as yet know why Laura had sent for her, nor what she would be asked to do for her friend. But the situation was already monstrous and impossible, and more than one ugly thought came into her mind. Her wish to help Laura was strong and sincere, but she fought in vain against a

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desire that was even stronger and more near to her heart—her love for John Shil.

There was no maidenly pride in the nature of the great actress, a pride which forbids a young girl to even let her thoughts dwell on a man who does not love her. Leonore Tankerlane was a woman of the world, with strong passions and a keen intellect. She had forced her way up from obscurity to fame. She was mistress of her own life and her own actions. She occupied a large place in the world of art, and could not possibly place herself on the level of a bashful school-girl. She had lived a clean life, and for many years she had thrust all thoughts of love out of her mind. And now that she was in love with a man she longed for him with all her body, mind, and soul.

And as the cab passed from the West End to the City, and from the City to the East, she tried to reconcile her two desires in a common plan of action. She wished to help Laura—and she wished to advance her own interests. If she could do both it would be well with her. If she could only accomplish one desire—that was the cruel dilemma, the eternal battle between duty and inclination.

And as she stared at the slums of the East End with eyes that saw nothing of their poverty and dreariness, she smoothed out the whole tangled skein of her thoughts with calm and faultless skill, and she smiled complacently as she came to a definite conclusion. The whole matter suddenly became ridiculously plain and simple. She would divorce William Tankerlane in America. She would then be free to marry John Shil, if she could win his love. And, on the other hand, Tankerlane would be free to marry Laura, and make amends for the wrong he had done to an innocent woman. If Laura consented to the marriage she would cease to be a rival.

Leonore persuaded herself that this arrangement would be best for all parties, and that it would certainly be in the interests of Laura herself. The latter's position in the world would be placed on a secure foundation. Tankerlane loved her, and would jump at the chance of making her his wife. John Shil could never marry her, after what had happened. This would certainly be best for all the four parties concerned.

The only difficulty was to be found in Laura's attitude towards Tankerlane, and Leonore made up her mind to devote all her energies to gain her friend's consent to the marriage.

Her meditations were brought to an abrupt conclusion by the sudden stopping of the hansom. Her mind was jerked back from abstract problems to more material facts. She alighted, and noticed that No. 37 was a particularly dingy house in a peculiarly ugly and mean street. Then she paid the cabman the exorbitant fare he demanded of her, and knocked on the dirty and blistered door.

Mrs Blurton answered the summons with almost instantaneous swiftness. She had already inspected the hansom and its well-dressed occupant from the ground floor window, and had come to the conclusion that here was a possible solution of the rent difficulty. Her fat face beamed pleasantly.

"I want to see Mrs Tankerlane," said Leonore. "Is she at home?"

Mrs Blurton's face fell.

"There ain't no sich name 'ere," she replied sullenly; "there's a Mrs Danby, and she's in trouble, poor thing, wot with'er baby so ill, and I ain't never seed a baby so ill since my little Jim died, and that was——"

"Take me up to Mrs Danby," interrupted Leonore. "This is 37, is it not?"

Her heart beat fast with expectation. Here was the solution of the problem. Laura would have to marry William Tankerlane for the sake of her child.

"Yus, this is 37," Mrs Blurton replied, as she led the way along the dark and narrow passage. "Yer a friend of Mrs Danby's, mebbe."

Leonore did not answer, but followed the landlady up the creaky stairs. Mrs Blurton knocked at a door—a ceremony which she had not observed for some weeks—and then opened it without waiting for a reply.

"Close the door, please," Leonore said abruptly to Mrs Blurton, who stood behind her with a look of curiosity on her round face. The landlady mumbled something and withdrew, closing the door behind her.

"Leonore," said a faint voice, "it was good of you to come—so good of you to come. I would not have asked you; but I was forced to do it, driven to it, Leonore."

The actress moved quickly across the room with outstretched hands, and the next moment the two women were sobbing in each other's arms, Laura from sheer misery and exhaustion, and Leonore from the sympathy she felt with another's sorrows.

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Leonore was the first to gain control of her feelings.

"Hush, Laura dear," she whispered, "you must not give way like this. You must be brave. I am here to help you. Tell me what I can do. Tell me why you are here—like this; why you left me in Paris without a word?"

She did not refer to the child, but she looked at the little head stirring uneasily on its pillow, and there was a mute questioning in her eyes as she glanced up at Laura's white face.

"Yes," the mother replied, "it is my child—Tankerlane's son. He is very ill; he will die if—oh, I cannot say it without shame, but I must say it, Leonore. We are penniless, starving. I am a beggar, and I sent for you because I want to beg—to ask for money—from you, the wife of the man who——" She stopped, and, covering her face with her hands, burst again into a fit of weeping.

Leonore looked at her with pity in her large bright eyes. This broken-down woman bore but little resemblance to the proud beauty who had held her head so high in Paris. Leonore's heart was full of loving sympathy, but even in this moment of sorrow she could not forget the new purpose that had come into her life. The steel had been softened and was ready for the moulding. The selfish thought came into her mind for an instant and was gone.

"Dear Laura," she said gently, "of course you can have all the money you want—all I have, if you require it. You must leave this place at once. It is not fit for a dog. You shall go to the seaside, abroad, anywhere you like. The child must get well at any cost."

"I sometimes think it would be better for him to die," Laura replied, clasping her hands and looking at the little white face. "God forgive me the thought, but it would be better for the child to die."

"Nonsense," said Leonore sharply. "You are worn out and miserable or you would not talk like that. The child must live; he must be rich, happy, well cared for. One day he must be the owner of the Tankerlane estates. I have heard they are not entailed."

"Oh no!" cried Laura, in horror. "He can never be that—never, never."

"Look here, Laura," said the actress, taking her friend by the arm and leading her to a chair by the window, "you must control yourself and be a sensible woman. I have come here to

help you, and you must listen to me. Enough mischief has been done already. It lies in your power to put everything straight. Where is William Tankerlane? Why has he deserted you at this time? Why are you here, in this slum, penniless, and starving?"

"I am here of my own free will," Laura replied slowly. "He does not know where I am; he knows nothing of the child. I do not wish him to know. I do not wish to see him again."

"Then all this is your own handiwork?" Leonore continued sternly. "The child here, ill, perhaps dying; your own misery; your poverty; your despair. Tankerlane is not to blame for all this."

"It is my own handiwork," Laura answered mechanically.

"And are you proud of it?" Leonore continued. "Do you like to think of the future, of your own position in the world; of your son—without a name, handicapped in the fierce struggle of life from his very birth? Do you like to think of all this?"

"When I think of it," Laura replied, "I only see one remedy—and that is death."

"Yet if you married Tankerlane," said Leonore, "all would be well."

"I will never marry William Tankerlane," cried Laura fiercely, "never. I would rather die."

"You talk like a fool," Leonore replied sharply.

"How can you suggest such a thing to me?" Laura continued—"you, his wife. It is wicked, horrible for you to talk of it."

"It is not a nice thing to talk about, certainly," said Leonore, "but it has to be discussed. You forget that this man has been nothing to me for years. As far as I am concerned, he is dead. He is not so much to me as the boots on my feet. Whether you marry him or not, I intend to divorce him before three months are over."

"And make the whole story public," said Laura, "and bring all my shame into the newspapers."

"Oh no," replied the actress with a smile. "We manage these things more quietly in America. Divorce is so common that it is not worth a paragraph in the papers. In three months' time Tankerlane will be a free man."

"I will not marry him," said Laura faintly. "I loathe him."

"Your own feelings are nothing," Leonore replied. "You have to think of the child—of his present condition—of his

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future life. No sacrifice is too hard for a mother who loves her child. Are you going to put your own likes and dislikes before the welfare of your son?"

"I loathe William Tankerlane," whispered Laura, "I loathe him."

"Very well," said Leonore, moving towards the door, "I will leave you. If these are your plans for your child's future, it is certainly better that he should die."

Leonore had reached the door before Laura realised the full force of the threat. A faint wail came from the child's lips, and the distracted mother sank on her knees beside the bed.

"Oh God," she muttered, "Oh God, have pity!"

Leonore paused at the door.

"Have pity!" Laura moaned. "Do not leave me, Leonore. He is so ill. I must have money. We shall be turned out of here if I do not pay Mrs Blurton money!"

The actress turned, and her lips quivered. The scene was a cruel and a painful one, and would have moved the heart of a colder and more determined woman than Leonore Tankerlane. And, to do her justice, she had no intention of leaving Laura to her fate. She was merely playing a game of bluff. She saw that a little pressure might force the wretched mother to yield, and she resolved to use the weapon that lay so readily to her hand. She resolved, in a word, to be cruel that she might be kind, for she had already persuaded herself that she was acting entirely in Laura's interests, and that she had thrust all thought of self from her mind. She crossed the room to the side of the bed, and laid her hand on Laura's shoulder.

"Laura, dear," she said gently, "I have tried to persuade you to do that which is best for the child and best for yourself. But you seem to have hardened your heart. You cannot apparently think of anything but your own hatred of William Tankerlane. Yet he loves you, and will be a good husband to you, and if you marry him, you ensure your own future and that of the child. I cannot think you are so selfish as to refuse to do this. If you think of it calmly, you will see that it is the right thing to do, and the only thing to do. I have argued with you in vain. Do not force me to use threats to a friend."

Laura was silent. She still knelt by the bedside, and her face was still buried in her hands. She did not move; she did

not speak ; she did not even cry. Her form seemed to have been frozen into stillness.

"Laura, my dear Laura," said the actress, speaking as a mother might speak to her child, "I beseech you to do the only thing you can do with honour and self-respect. There is surely no need for me to be unkind. For your own sake, for the sake of your child, I implore you—ah, Laura, dear, we all have to make sacrifices for those we love—that is the crowning glory of our womanhood."

The actress spoke sincerely, and was moved by a genuine desire to do the best thing possible for her friend. There was nothing of the hypocrite in her nature. She had for the moment forgotten her own interests. She did not plead because she wished to place Laura Vane beyond the reach of John Shil. She pleaded in the hope of doing the best possible thing for Laura and her child. The art of the actress does this at least for a woman : it gives her the power of throwing her heart and soul into a part, and believing in the reality of her acting.

For a few moments Laura neither moved nor spoke. Then she rose suddenly to her feet. Her face was white and hard and worn, as though she had gone into the Valley of Deep Shadows, and seen things that make the heart weary and old.

"I will do as you wish," she said in a faint voice ; "I will make the sacrifice."

"Of your own free will?" asked Leonore. "See here," and opening the little bag which served as a purse, she drew out a small packet of bank-notes. "Here are notes for a hundred pounds. Take them. I am glad to lend the money to you. Take them, and keep them. Without any reference to your decision, they are yours."

Laura held out her hand and took the notes—the mere bits of paper that meant so much to her. Her fingers closed on them like a vice.

"Now you have the money," Leonore continued, "consider your decision again, and give me a final answer. I am no longer in a position to use threats. You have money for your immediate needs. You are independent. I make no conditions. The money is yours, whatever you decide to do. I only ask you to do that which is best for yourself and your child."

Laura was silent, and she turned her eyes from Leonore's face to the face of the little child.

"The money is yours," said Leonore, "and as much more

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as I can afford to give you. Now tell me what you have decided to do. Will you marry William Tankerlane or not?"

"I will marry William Tankerlane," said Laura, almost in a whisper. "I can see that it is the only thing for me to do."

"You will do it of your own free will?"

"I will do it for the sake of my child," Laura answered tenderly. "You have taught me a lesson, Leonore; I see things more clearly. I see what motherhood means. I see my duty to my son."

"Promise me that you will do this when Tankerlane is a free man."

"I promise."

"Swear it by all you hold most sacred, by your God, by your hope of salvation, by the life of your little child."

"I swear it by all the things which I hold most sacred."

There was a tap on the door, and Mrs Blurton entered without further ceremony. She held out a china plate with a card on it.

"A gent to see yer, Mrs Danby," she said, with a placid smile.

Laura took the card from the plate, and, as she read the name, a look of fear came into her eyes.

John Shil had found her at last.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE NAME OF LOVE

"Who is it?" Leonore asked quickly.

Laura handed her the card in silence, and the actress looked at the name.

"You must not see him," she exclaimed. "He has no right to come here. Of course you will not see him."

She spoke hurriedly, and there was a trace of fear in her voice. An interview between John Shil and Laura might prove too much for the latter's courage. She might break her word, might repudiate her oath; women will do almost anything in the name of love.

"No, I cannot see him," Laura replied, in a trembling voice, and then, turning to Mrs Blurton, who was vainly trying to understand the situation, she added, "Please tell the gentleman that I cannot see him."

Mrs Blurton left the room, and creaked heavily down the stairs.

"You must never see him again," said Leonore. "Remember that, Laura, whatever happens. It would be cruel for him, cruel for both of you. He has passed out of your life."

"Everything has passed out of my life," Laura murmured piteously, "my father, my girlhood, my happiness, my friends. I have lost everything." She walked slowly towards the bed, and, sitting down on the edge of it, laid her hand softly on the coverlet, close to the face of her little child.

"Only you remain to me, my darling," she whispered, "only you, if God will spare you to me."

There was again the sound of creaking stairs, and Mrs Blurton re-entered the room, very red in the face.

"'E sez 'e won't go," she said, gasping for breath. "'E's a sittin' there in the parlour, for all the bloomin' world as if 'e

owned it, and when I called 'is attention to the view, than which, tho' I sez it as shouldn't, there ain't no finer view in Widley Street, he used words as no gen'leman 'd use in the presence of a lydy. And I tell you strite, Mrs Danby, if it's yer 'usband as 'as come for yer, yer'd better clear off with 'im, afore I have yer both——"

"That'll do," said Leonore sharply. "I'll go and see the gentleman myself. I suppose Mrs Danby owes you rent, or you wouldn't dare to speak to her in this way. Well, she has money now to buy your civility."

"An 'ouse is an 'ouse," cried Mrs Blurton, "and this is my 'ouse, and I won't 'ave it used by men and wimmin as if it was a public, and you can all of you clear out."

Her voice had risen to a shriek, and the child began to wail. Its tiny voice had more effect on the irate Mrs Blurton than Leonore's words of contempt. She stared aghast at the bed, as though someone had risen from the grave to rebuke her.

"Oh, the pore blessed hinfant," she muttered. "I didn't ought to 'ave spoke so loud. I'm an ill-tempered old woman, Mrs Danby, I don't mean all I says—and I'm that worried—but yer 'ave the money now, dearie, ain't yer? and we'll all be as 'appy as little birds in a nest."

Leonore brushed past her, and descended the stairs. She needed no guide to conduct her to the parlour, for the house had only two rooms on the ground floor, and one of them was the kitchen. She entered the room and closed the door behind her. John Shil rose and faced her defiantly.

"So you have followed me," she said contemptuously. "I should have thought of that. But I did not think I had to deal with such a clever detective."

"Yes, I have followed you," he replied bluntly; "it was the natural thing for me to do."

"Hardly the natural thing for an honourable man to do. But you have put yourself to a lot of trouble, and you will gain nothing by it. Laura absolutely declines to see you."

"I shall wait here till she does see me," he replied doggedly.

"Then we shall have to send for the police and have you turned out."

"If I am turned out I shall hang about the place till I see her. Now that I have found her, I do not intend to lose sight of her again."

"You are mad," cried Leonore passionately. "Do you realise that she is the wife of another man?"

"I realise that he has deserted her," he replied, looking out of the window at the wilderness of broken crockery and empty tins. "I am willing to bet that William Tankerlane is not living in Widley Street."

"Well, she refuses to see you. She is ill, worn out, and the mere sight of you might destroy the little strength she has left. She is not fit for an interview with a man who loves her, and no man who loved her would ask it."

"I must see her," he replied. "I was a fool to come here while you were with her. It is you who refuse to let me see her; if you were not here——"

"Listen to me," said Leonore calmly. "Laura is upstairs in the room overhead. She is worn out with grief and pain. She is watching by the bedside of her child—who is very ill, perhaps dying."

"Her child," cried the man hoarsely—"her child! Oh God, let me think, let me understand!"

Leonore was silent, and watched the look on his face. She realised what the birth of a child would mean to him. It would stand between him and his hopes for ever. He might try to rob a husband of his wife, but he could not rob a mother of her child.

"Laura has a son," she said after a pause. "I can see that you understand what that means. Do you still wish to see her?"

"Yes," he replied passionately. "I must see her—I must speak to her—I must hear her voice."

"This is madness," she said coldly; "the behaviour of a child. Have you anything particular to say to her?"

"Yes, yes," he cried hurriedly. "I must know why she married this man; I must know why he has left her at such a time as this; I must know what her plans are for the future. I want to help her, to make life happy for her."

"The best thing you can do for her happiness is to keep out of her life. She can never be anything to you. If you have something to say to her, you had better write it."

"I must see her," he cried angrily; "I insist on seeing her. I will not leave here until I have seen her."

"You coward!" cried Leonore, stung at last to fury. "Have you no shame, no pity? Do you dare to speak of her like this

to me after—after what has happened? ‘She is nothing to me; I have forgotten her.’ I think those were your words. But I will keep you from her. I will defend her from your persecutions. Leave this house at once, Mr Shil, or I will send for the police and have you turned out.”

She walked over to the fireplace and pulled the bell violently, but the handle came off in her hand, and a foot of wire with it. Her face was white with passion, and even John Shil, in the full strength of his own madness, shrank from the blaze of fury in her eyes. She flung the broken handle to the floor, and, opening the door, called out to Mrs Blurton.

“That will do, Leonore,” said John Shil with as much dignity as he could command. “You have gone far enough. I will leave here to avoid the scene you wish to force upon me. I will see Laura another time.”

“Never again, if I can keep you two apart.”

“You cannot,” he retorted, “and, if you try, it is you who will suffer.”

She looked at him piteously, and for a moment the fury died from her face. It grew haggard and old, the face of a heart-broken woman.

“Yes,” she replied slowly, “and it is I who suffer now—oh, how I suffer!”

She sank into a chair by the table, and, burying her face in her arms, sobbed bitterly, without pride and without shame—a woman with her heart laid bare.

John Shil felt all the pangs of a guilty conscience as he looked at her bowed head and quivering body. He saw himself as a pitiful coward, as a dishonoured man. And yet he knew that he could not make amends.

“Forgive me, Leonore,” he muttered. “I have been a cad—a brute——”

He might have said more, moved as he was by a sudden burst of self-condemnation, but at that moment Mrs Blurton entered.

“I’d ’a come sooner,” she exclaimed, and then, observing the peculiar situation, she paused.

Leonore sprang to her feet.

“I thought I heard a knock at the hall door,” she explained lamely, “and you did not seem to hear it, so I——”

She was spared any further tax on her powers of invention, for at that moment there actually came a heavy rap on the

hall door, followed by a thud, as though someone had fallen against it.

Mrs Blurton went out into the hall, and Leonore smiled. The coincidence had been more than opportune. It was almost uncanny, as though some supernatural power had intervened to give reality to the lie she had uttered. She listened and heard the hall door open. Then for a second there was silence, and then a loud screech of delight from Mrs Blurton.

"Oh, 'Enry, 'Enry! My boy, my pore blessed boy. That's right, dearie, you 'old on to your pore old mother's arm. You're tired, 'Enry, that's wot you are; bin a-working yerself to death, that's wot you 'ave."

The hall door closed with a bang, and there was a sound of shuffling in the passage, accompanied by the coaxing endearments of Mrs Blurton, and a few oaths, fortunately scarcely intelligible, from the man addressed as "pore 'Enry."

John Shil moved forward to close the door, and then, remembering that he had no right to keep Mrs Blurton out of her own sitting-room, he paused, and turned to Leonore.

"You had better go upstairs," he said abruptly. "I will leave the house. Good-bye, and remember, Leonore, that you cannot keep Laura from me. I shall write to her."

Leonore, still trembling with emotion, did not answer him, and he walked towards the door. But, before he reached it, Mrs Blurton appeared in the entrance, holding a very small man by the arm. "Pore 'Enry" hung very limply in his mother's grasp, and his appearance suggested that he had been having a royal time. His small eyes were bloodshot and watery, and his ugly little face was smeared with dirt, as though he had fallen in the mud. Otherwise his appearance had much improved since the day he had met William Tankerlane in the Round Plantation, and agreed to accept £100 a year for his silence. His clothes were tolerably new, and the gorgeous yellow check of the material was almost painful to the eye. His tie was blue as an Italian lake, and a large magenta handkerchief hung out of his breast pocket. His boots were brilliant as marigolds.

"That's my one and only," said Mrs Blurton, thrusting him forward into a chair which stood near the door. "'E's got on in the world, 'e 'as. Ain't 'e a real gentleman? Look up, 'Enry, my lamb, and speak to the lydy. 'E's as shy as a girl, Miss."

Leonore, as she glanced at the mean and degraded little object in the chair, thought the mother's words were uttered in a spirit of sarcasm, but a single look at Mrs Blurton's face undeceived her on this point. Intoxication was hardly reckoned as a crime in Widley Street, but new and glossy clothes were scarce, and they made an irresistible appeal to the mother's pride.

John Shil frowned and would have left the room, but Mrs Blurton's body blocked up the doorway.

"'E's tired, poor boy," she said tenderly; "'e must 'ave worked 'ard to get on so considerable. 'Enry, speak to the lydy."

Henry Blurton, who had been partially sobered by his violent contact with the chair, grinned and blinked his eyes.

"Pleashed to meet yer," he mumbled. Then his eyes wandered to the face of John Shil, who was looking at him much as a man might look at a lump of dirt which required immediate removal.

"Pleashed ter meet Mr Shil, too," he continued, with an evil smile. "Mos' pleashed ter meet Shil."

John Shil looked at him in surprise. He had never seen the man before, but he noted that the drunken stare had given place to a look of intelligence. It was clear that the man must know him well to recognise him under the present conditions. Drink does not tend to sharpen a man's memory.

"A friend of yours?" asked Leonore quietly.

"Never set eyes on him before," John Shil replied. "You will excuse me, Mrs Blurton, but I must be going. Good-bye, Leonore."

Mrs Blurton sniffed audibly.

"Why don't yer speak to the lad?" she cried angrily; "'ain't 'e fit to speak to yer? Ain't 'e got good 'nuff clothes and fine speech for yer? I know where 'e's met yer—in Portland Gaol! Ho, ho, I dersay yer were both in Portland together, friends mebbe."

John Shil smiled. "I'm afraid you are mistaken," he replied; "but I am most interested to learn that your son has been in Portland. You have reason to be proud of him."

He walked straight to the door, and Mrs Blurton, to avoid a collision, rolled aside to let him pass.

"'Ere, 'ere," cried Henry Blurton, trying to rise from his seat, but falling back in a heap. "'Ere, come back, you. Stop 'im; stop thief."

John Shil paused in the doorway, and then came back with an ugly scowl on his face. The little man seemed to shrink into a mere ball of yellow cloth as he encountered the look in his eyes.

"Look here," said Shil angrily, "you'd better go to bed and try to get sober. I've half a mind to give you a good hiding, and teach you how to behave yourself in the presence of a lady. But, as you're drunk, you probably don't know what a little beast you're making of yourself."

Henry thrust out his head from the protecting cushion, and it looked like the head of a snake peering out of a tuft of grass.

"Wantsh speak ter yer, Shil."

"If you have anything to say to me," Shil replied, "this lady will give you my address. And if you are not civil to her I'll break every bone in your wretched little body, and if you cause any annoyance to the lady upstairs, I'll chuck you into the Thames. As for you, madam," and he turned to Mrs Blurton, who stood purple and speechless with indignation, "you'd better take this whelp upstairs and give him a good thrashing and put him to bed."

With these words he strode out of the room.

"Stop 'im!" cried the little man. "Stop thief! Murder! Fire! Police!" but the only answer to his cries was the slam of the hall door.

"Oh, I could do wiv a drink, I could," he murmured.

"My precious," his mother said tenderly, as if speaking to a child, "I'll get yer some water."

"Water be hanged," he gurgled. "Give us a drop of gin, ma! You know the stuff. Do you still keep it in the coal-box?"

Mrs Blurton left the room, but Leonore still lingered. Her first impulse had been to escape as quickly as possible from the presence of the drunken little cad in the arm-chair. But his recognition of John Shil had aroused her interest.

"You have met Mr Shil before?" she asked carelessly.

Henry did not answer, but he winked at her.

"Pretty gal," he said slyly, as if to himself. "Very pretty gal."

"What do you know of Mr Shil?" Leonore persisted.

Again Mr Henry Blurton winked, and held out a very dirty hand.

"I've got 'im 'ere," he said, "in the 'oller of my 'and, as they say in books. Oh, I knows 'im, and I knows Mr Tankerlane. But mebbe you don't know that kind, nice gentleman."

"No, I don't," replied Leonore, waiting for further information.

"Oh, 'e's a beauty, 'e is," said Henry, "an 'e was so kind to pore 'Enry, 'e was. But 'e ain't so kind now. And it's Mr Shil as 'll 'ave ter be kind to me now, bless 'is eart. Mr Tankerlane 'as forgotten pore little 'Enry, as was so good to 'im."

Henry Blurton told the truth. William Tankerlane had stopped the monthly payments, in the hope that the man would speak and bring John Shil to the gallows.

"I don't think you'll get much out of Mr Shil," Leonore said, after a pause. "He's not very kind to people like you, and he's a strong man."

"I know it," Henry replied. "I've seen 'im use 'is strength, and it'd be better for 'im if I 'adn't."

Leonore opened her little bag and took out a five-pound note. It rustled cheerfully as she crumpled it in her fingers.

"If you've anything to sell," she said quietly, "I might buy it."

"Lor bless you," said Mr Blurton, "that 'ere fiver ain't no earthly. I've 'ad two of 'em a month regular."

"I can pay well," said Leonore, still getting sweet sounds out of the crisp note. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yus, yer an actress," replied Henry. "I've seen yer act. But I don't 'old wif actresses, I don't."

"Well, anyway, I can pay well," said Leonore, holding out the note. "Take this, just to buy yourself a drink, and if you'll call on me to-morrow, and you have anything worth buying, I may buy it. Here is my address."

Henry Blurton took the money and Leonore's card, and scowled thoughtfully at the name.

"I'll call on yer to-morrow morning," he said. "To think of pore 'Enry a-callin' on a real play actress."

Mrs Blurton entered the room with a glass of gin and water, and Leonore went upstairs to Laura.

"John Shil has gone," she said, as she entered the room, "and he will not trouble you again. But you must leave here at once, if the baby can be moved. I will give you the address of a nursing-home in Broadstairs, where you both will receive every care and attention that medical skill can

provide. You want nursing back to health yourself. I will call and see you this week-end. I can get down after the show is over, and return on Monday. We can then talk over plans for the future."

"It is very good of you, Leonore," said Laura faintly. "God bless you, dear, for your kindness." And, throwing her arms round her friend's neck, she kissed her tenderly.

The actress returned her embrace with less warmth, and, as she drove home to her flat, she still felt Laura's kiss on her cheek, and it seemed to sear her flesh.

For Leonore had taken another downward step that bright summer morning, and she could not shut out the possible consequences from her mind. She had offered to purchase something which might place John Shil in her hands. And she had done this so that she might have him in her power, and bend his stubborn nature to her will.

Such evil can love work in the heart of a passionate woman.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BARGAIN

THE next morning Laura and her little child went down to Broadstairs, John Shil left London for his new home in Essex, and Leonore had a long interview with Henry Blurton.

The result of this interview was satisfactory to one at least of the parties. Blurton left the house with £40 in his pocket, and he was promised a similar sum every quarter if he continued to hold his tongue about what he had seen in the Round Plantation. In addition to this he had bound himself by a solemn oath to have no more dealings with William Tankerlane, and to speak the truth if Leonore should ever call upon him to do so.

When he had left the room, Leonore leaned back in her chair and stared vacantly at the ceiling. Her brain was in a tumult. At first she thought less of her transaction with Blurton than of the information she had bought, and of the light which the narrative had thrown on circumstances which had hitherto been incomprehensible.

She had always wondered why Laura had refused to marry the man she loved, and had consented to marry William Tankerlane. Now at last she had knowledge of the truth, and the knowledge was bitterness to her. Laura had married Tankerlane to save her lover. In silence and secrecy this woman had made the greatest sacrifice any woman can make for a man. She had given herself body and soul to a man whose very presence was loathsome to her. Small wonder that she had been glad to learn that the marriage was a farce; small wonder that she had refused to legalise the marriage, and that only the thought of her child had forced her to make a second sacrifice. Such was the love of Laura Vane, unquestioning, complete, almost terrible in its self-negation and its perfect

strength. And it was bitterness to Leonore to think of it and compare it with her own.

What had she herself done for the man she loved? She had devoted all her energies to gain her own selfish ends without any regard for the happiness of others. She had forced Laura Vane to consent to a marriage with Tankerlane, and she had bought the dark secret of John Shil's life in order that she might use it to her own advantage. In vain she tried to persuade herself that she had done this to save him from the threats and malevolence of Henry Blurton. She knew well enough that Shil himself was a rich man, and would readily have paid more than she could afford to pay in the way of hush money. She could not hide the truth from her conscience. She had paid for the information, and not for the silence of Henry Blurton.

But self-condemnation was not the only disturbing thought in Leonore's mind as she pondered over the information she had just purchased. The story itself, bearing as it did on the conduct of the man she loved, was sufficiently terrible. It was incomplete, incoherent, and indefinite. It had been told by a man who could only speak of what he had seen and heard. It was the narrative of a cold-blooded and purposeless crime. Henry Blurton could supply no information as to motive, nor did his words suggest any excuse for John Shil's conduct. Yet Leonore's heart told her that the man she loved could only have acted as he did under the strongest provocation. She determined to learn the truth from his own lips.

Then William Tankerlane, her own husband, rose up as a menace to her future plans—a grim spectre that threatened the destruction of all her hopes and schemes. He knew all that Blurton had told her. It was even possible that he knew more. It was certain that he had paid the man to be silent, and that he had ceased making the payments with a definite object in view. So long as Tankerlane was in a position to inform against John Shil, so long would her own plans be in danger, and her own knowledge worthless. She resolved to see her husband at the earliest opportunity, and bring pressure to bear upon him. She had a tempting bait to offer. If he took it, she would catch two fish on one line: Laura would be held captive in a prison from which there was no escape, and Tankerlane's silence would be ensured.

It only took Leonore ten days to find her husband, though

John Shil had searched for months in vain. This speedy result was brought about by the death of Sir Robert Tankerlane, which occurred two days after she commenced her search. The son and heir returned from Vienna for the funeral, and her letter was answered by a telegram saying that he would call on her at six o'clock the following evening.

She awaited his arrival with impatience, and with a certain amount of trepidation. Her plan of action was well defined, and contained all the elements of success. But it is the unexpected that often happens, and even the strongest line of attack may have some weak point. The interview, moreover, was bound to be unpleasant, for she had no intention of concealing from Tankerlane what she thought of his conduct.

He arrived, punctual almost to the minute, and bowed gravely as he entered the room. That was his only salutation, and Leonore did not even return this scant courtesy. She merely pointed to a seat, and settled herself in an armchair. She noticed that the man had aged considerably since she had last seen him in Paris, and that there were signs of suffering on his hard features.

"Well, Leonore," he said, after an awkward pause, "what is it you have to say to me?"

"I have a good deal to say," she replied, "and some of it will leave an unpleasant taste in my mouth."

"Do you want to claim your rights as my wife?" he asked with a sneer. "I am in a better position now than when I married you."

"Please relieve your mind on that score," she answered coldly. "I would not live with you for all the gold in the world. But I have come to the conclusion that some change must be made in our relations to each other. I propose to get a divorce from you, and I shall, of course, obtain it in America, the country where we were married."

Sir William Tankerlane looked keenly at his wife's face, as though anxious to discover her motive for this sudden proposal. But he could read nothing from her features.

"Generous woman," he said, in a sarcastic voice. "May I ask what has moved you to pity for my lot?"

"I will tell you," she replied. "I don't care a red cent what happens to you, and I would rather you were miserable than happy. But the happiness of my friend, Laura Vane, is very dear to me. I wish you to marry her."

"Unfortunately she does not wish to marry me," he answered drily, "and she has taken the greatest possible trouble to hide herself from me. I have not seen or heard of her since she left me in Paris, though I have searched high and low for her."

"I saw her a few days ago," Leonore replied, "and she is willing to marry you."

William Tankerlane leant forward suddenly in his chair, and a hungry look came into his eyes.

"Is this true?" he cried, "or are you fooling me?"

"It is perfectly true," Leonore replied. "When I have fixed up terms I will take you to her."

"Why has she changed her mind?" he asked suspiciously. "Has absence made the heart grow fonder?" And then he laughed bitterly. He had not forgotten the scene in Paris, when he had last pleaded with Laura Vane.

"Her feelings towards you have not changed," said Leonore. "I will not deceive you on that point. She still loathes the very mention of your name."

"Ah, she is starving!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Her spirit is broken. She longs for comfort, for luxury, for fine clothes and jewels, and all that wealth can purchase. She dare not go back to her father; she dare not go to John Shil. She has been forced to come back to me. It is not flattering to me, but I am glad—I will welcome her with open arms; I will forgive her; I will make her love me."

"No," replied Leonore gravely. "She has faced poverty and misery without flinching. But something else has come into her life—a great joy—a great sorrow—and it is because this has come into her life that she is willing to marry you."

William Tankerlane looked at her with parted lips and staring eyes.

"I do not understand," he faltered. "What do you mean?" Then he rose to his feet with a cry, and his face was flushed and his eyes sparkled.

"Do you mean," he cried, "that Laura—that I—oh Heaven, I had not thought of this! It is a lie!"

"It is the truth," said Leonore quietly; "you have a son, born five months ago, and it is for the child's sake that Laura is willing to marry you. She is going to sacrifice herself to save her child from shame. And that is why I have sent for you,



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and that is why I am going to cut the rope that still holds us together."

"A son!" muttered Tankerlane, and his hard-lined face was lit up with joy. But he had the decency to give no utterance to his thoughts. He remembered he was in the presence of the woman who was still his wife in name.

"Yes," said Leonore coldly, "and you have every reason to be glad. Laura would never have consented to marry you if it had not been for this."

"Yet she did not tell me," he cried hastily; "she did not write to me. She was hard and stubborn even in the face of this. The child was born five months ago, and it is only to-day that you—there is something in this I do not understand. How she must have suffered! How she must have suffered!"

"Yes," replied Leonore, "and she would still be suffering in silence if I had not persuaded her to do the right thing—if I had not put the whole situation clearly to her—but there, I have done my part. It remains for you to do yours."

"Take me to her at once," he exclaimed. "Give me her address."

"Be calm," Leonore said, with a ghost of a smile. "There are matters to be arranged between you and me before I bring you to the woman you love or take any steps to give you your freedom."

Tankerlane looked inquiringly at her face, and then he laughed.

"Oh! the price?" he said cheerfully. "I see. Well, how much do you want? I am a rich man now, Leonore, and you can open your mouth wide."

"I am very well off myself, thank you," she replied. "I earn quite a lot of money. I want something else from you—something perhaps that you won't care to give. But you've got to give it, if you want to marry Laura Vane."

"Well, what is it?" he asked abruptly.

"During the last few months," she replied, "I have seen a good deal of a certain Mr John Shil."

"Oh, have you!" he exclaimed, and then he looked keenly at her face. But her eyes were fixed on the ground, and there was nothing to be learned from the rest of her features.

"Yes," she continued quietly, "and I have also met a certain Henry Blurton. He once did you a service, I believe."

for which you paid him liberally. I understand you have ceased the payments."

William Tankerlane was silent, but his face was not pleasant to look upon.

"Mr Blurton, however," continued Leonore, "is now completely happy and satisfied. In other words, he has told me all he has to tell, and I have paid him liberally for the information."

"The devil you have!" exclaimed Tankerlane.

"The value of the information," Leonore proceeded, "appears to be materially lessened by the fact that you were also a witness of all that happened on that particular occasion. Shall I tell you exactly what I think of the conduct of a man who induces a girl to marry him by threatening the life or liberty of her lover, and who then has to confess that he has not married her? Shall I give you a name to fit the act? Would you like to hear what——"

"I don't want to hear anything about it," broke in Tankerlane. "Your opinion is nothing to me. Get to the point."

"Well, the point is this," said Leonore. "Before I take you to Laura or take any steps to make you free, you must swear to me, by all you hold most sacred, never to breathe a word of what you saw in the plantation to any living soul—under any circumstances whatever—not even to save your life or honour, or the life and honour of those you love."

Tankerlane frowned, and he appeared to be estimating the value of the price he was asked to pay. Then he turned sharply to Leonore and laughed.

"What are you driving at?" he asked. "What is this John Shil to you, that you are so anxious about his safety?"

"That is a question I shall not answer," she replied, "for it does not concern the matter at all. It is possible that I am fond of Mr Shil, or it is possible that I wish to serve him for the sake of Laura, who loves him; or it is possible that I am only desirous of getting something out of you in return for what I am going to give. But my object is beside the question. Do you accept my terms, or not?"

"I accept them," he said slowly, with his eyes still fixed on Leonore's face.

"Swear the oath to me," she said sternly.

He swore it, and when he had finished, he burst into a fit of *laughter*, and held out his hand.



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"Shake hands, Leonore," he exclaimed. "By Heaven, I admire you. You are the cleverest woman I have ever met. Well, if you can get Shil to marry you, you'll do me a good turn as well."

Leonore did not answer, but, crossing over to a table, wrote Laura's address on a piece of paper, and handed it to him.

"Be sure that you keep your oath," she said quietly, "or I shall know how to deal with you."

He laughed gaily and left the room. But Leonore buried her head in her arms and sobbed bitterly.

CHAPTER XX

BY THE TIDAL POOL

WHEN John Shil left the dingy little house in Widley Street, he walked furiously till he found a cab, and then he drove to his hotel.

His thoughts were none of the sweetest as he leant over the doors of the hansom and scowled vacantly at the passers-by. Laura was lost to him forever. The birth of her son had placed an insurmountable barrier between them. She might have been willing to leave her husband, but she would not leave her child, and even if she consented to sacrifice her honour as a wife, she would not be able to bear the thought of the inevitable separation from her little boy. For Shil, who knew nothing of the truth, supposed that the law would give the custody of the child to its father.

He came to the conclusion that he had done the right thing in leaving the house without the interview for which he had entered it. Such an interview could only augment his sorrow, and would be nothing short of cruelty to the woman he loved. Leonore had undoubtedly acted for the best when she declined to allow him to see Laura Vane.

But as to Leonore herself? Ah, there was another problem which might have to be faced in the near future. Without any actual attempt at deception he had deceived her, and the memory of his conduct was gall to him. He had imagined that they were both playing the same game. Now he knew that the woman had been in earnest. He owed her some reparation. He would have to decide how he could make amends to her. He knew the only thing that an honourable gentleman could do under the circumstances, but he shrank from the very thought of it.

Strangely enough, no recollection of Henry Blurton entered

his mind as he drove back to the Carlton. The incident of the little drunkard had passed completely out of his brain. At the moment it hardly impressed him as being of any importance, and the space of half an hour had relegated it to the mental dust-heap. Yet if John Shil had only known the truth, he would have returned at once to Widley Street, and have made terms with the unimportant Henry Blurton.

John Shil left London that evening for his new home in Essex. He had bought it because it was close to Lord Crawcour's estate, and he knew all that there was to be known about the house and the land which belonged to it. He had also taken a great liking for the Earl and his son, Lord Portlington, and he wished to settle down in a district where he could be sure of a friendly welcome.

The surrounding country did not appeal to him, and he would have preferred some estate in the vicinity of the Stonewold Hills. But that part of the world was barred from him for ever. It was the home of the Tankerlanes, and the shadow of their name rested on every hill and field and tree.

Black Hall, for three hundred years the home of the Black-Hintons, was a gloomy-looking mansion on the very edge of the eastern marshlands. It had been built by one Francis Black, who had married the heiress of the Hintons, and had at once proceeded to pull down the ancient residence of that great Saxon family. He must have been a man who carried the art of punning to excess, for he built his new home entirely of black granite, and the cost of the material must have been ruinous in those days of bad roads and imperfect transportation by sea.

The colour of the stone gave the house a forbidding exterior, but it was a large mansion, and finely built, and the interior would have done credit to a modern architect unhampered by any thoughts of time or money. All the rooms were spacious and lofty; the carved woodwork was superb; and the outlook from the windows was far more cheerful than the view of the house from the gardens.

"After all," said John Shil, as he inspected it, "a house is meant to live in, not to look at."

And the interior of Black Hall was truly magnificent. For several months engineers, architects, builders, furnishers, and artists had been at work on it. John Shil had spared no expense, and everyone had worked with the knowledge that

they could spend as much as they liked, so long as they gave value for the money. The furniture was old and costly and beautiful, and the decorations were in perfect harmony with the ancient character of the place. The modern bathrooms suggested the splendours of ancient Rome; the stables, cool, spacious, and blue-tiled, would have seemed a paradise to many a working man. Electric light had been installed everywhere, and there had been no question of economy in volts and units. At night-time the whole building was a veritable blaze of light. There was no lack of cheerfulness in Black Hall; only the outer walls were grim and dark, like the walls of some prison in a smoke-grimed town.

Such was the home that John Shil had made for himself, and where he had resolved to live his life alone. As he drove up from the station, and descended the sloping hills which bounded his property on the west, he saw the mansion glittering like some jewel among the dark trees. Beyond it lay a narrow fringe of woodland, black even in the light of the full moon overhead; and then came the grey expanse of the marshes stretching to the sea—a dull flat country that struck a chill into his heart. The creeks that intersected the land in every direction and shone like silver in the moonlight, lent a touch of beauty to the scene, but he shuddered as he looked at them. To his fancy they seemed cold and still and slimy, like serpents lying in wait for some human prey.

But in the morning, when the whole country lay green and quiet in the sunshine, and the salt breath of the sea came floating up through the winding channels with the tide, he regarded his new home in a more favourable light, and set to work to fight out the battle that had been forced upon him—a battle with his own heart, in which victory could only come from forgetfulness.

Day after day he flung himself into his new life with untiring energy. He had purchased five thousand acres of land with the house, and he intended to be his own land agent. He had his own ideas of what constituted a model estate, and here was a wide field for his labours. The property had been shamefully neglected, and he resolved to make it the envy of every farmer and land-owner in Essex. There were a thousand things to be thought of and planned out, a thousand things to be done under his personal supervision. He did not spare *himself*. From morning to night he rode round his property.

And, when dinner-time came, he was so tired that he was glad to get the meal over and go to bed.

Sunday was the only day of rest he allowed himself, and each week he looked forward to it with increasing dread, for rest meant time for thought, and thought meant all the terrors of regret.

He had often spent part of this day of idleness in a place which was particularly unsuitable for a man who was inclined to melancholy. But it attracted him for two very dissimilar reasons: one, because it seemed in harmony with his thoughts, and the other because he had an idea of doing away with the place altogether, and he could not decide how to carry out the work.

On the eastern edge of the park there was a wide belt of trees which stretched along the very boundary of the estate. At one point a large clearing had been made in this wood, and the space, which gradually sloped towards the centre, had been laid out in a most peculiar manner. Against the trees themselves there was a wide fringe of lawn, studded with flower-beds. Then there was a circular gravel path, running parallel to the fringe of lawn; then there was another belt of lawn, and then a low wall, ornamented at intervals with small and grotesque statues.

All this was apparently but a setting for the centre of the circle, and a visitor might justly have expected to find something of beauty on the other side of the wall—a magnificent fountain, a group of statuary—a smiling lake dotted with water lilies, a blaze of rare flowers.

But in this he would have been disappointed. The wall, which seemed low on the side which faced the trees, sank down on the other side to a much greater depth. It merely enclosed a tidal pool, which was joined to the creek outside by a stone culvert. At high tide the pool was half full of muddy water, and at low tide it was only a bare patch of mud, wet, glistening, and loathsome to look upon.

Local tradition stated that the place had once been used as a bathing pool, and that a century ago the water was clear as crystal. But, if there was any truth in the legend, some ancient system of purifying the water must have been lost, for no self-respecting person could possibly have bathed in the brown slimy liquid which surged up through the culvert twice in every twenty-four hours. John Shil one day took a long

pole, and thrust it into the mud which lay at the bottom. Leaning over the edge of the wall, he buried the bamboo six feet in the slime, and even then he did not reach the hard ground beneath.

It was here, by the side of this tidal pool, that John Shil, after five weeks' residence at Black Hall, spent an afternoon which was destined to leave its mark for ever in the story of his life.

A flight of broken steps ran down from the wall to the pool, and he was sitting on the last step but two, with his feet almost on the edge of the water. The tide was still flowing, and the surface of the pool was stirred with little currents and eddies as the sea forced its way through the culvert.

The tide, regular and resistless as the advance of time, had always had a strange fascination for the young man. The ebb and flow of it seemed to pulse like a human life—birth and death, ebb and flow, for all eternity. And here, in the silence of the cloistered trees and the sunlit lawns, it had a new and mysterious charm. There was no roar of the waves, no thunder of breakers on the shore, no swirl of the waters past pier-head or groin. Yet the force was still there. Silent and irresistible, it had crept up from the great sea itself, over miles of sandbank, past great spaces of lonely marshland, moving on and on through narrowing channels till it had reached this spot. And here it ceased, in a tiny eddy of muddy waters—one of the last quivering nerves in a throbbing system that covers the oceans of the world.

This link with the great sea of tall ships and distant climes had a peculiar charm for John Shil in his loneliness, and his thoughts strayed to the things outside his park, and the great scheme of life from which he had withdrawn himself—like a man overpowered in battle.

And as he thought of the things that had been and of all that he had lost, his heart cried out in rebellion against the decrees of fate.

"What have I done?" he said to himself. "Why has God broken me like a worthless jar? And what has she done, my beloved; what crime has she committed that she should be tied for life to a man she loathes?"

And then, to the music of the gurgling waters, the answer came back to him:

"You have sinned; though it was for but half a minute, you

have sinned. You let a man die, and this is your punishment. You must suffer, and she must suffer too."

And again his soul cried out to God.

"It was for such a little while. I mastered the evil thought. I would have saved him. Is there no return to Paradise?"

And again the reply came back, "Too late! Too late! The doors are closed. You cannot enter now."

John Shil rose to his feet with clenched hands and the light of rebellion in his eyes.

"I am the master of my own fate," he cried to himself. "Honour! Morality! Providence! Submission! What are all these to me? These are words for the weak and the feeble. They are not words for a man who can fight. I will return to her. I will take her from him. And the child?" His train of thought came to a standstill, and then the voice of the devil whispered in his ear:

"Perhaps the child may die."

The evil thought defined itself and almost became a prayer. But before he had defiled his soul with the wish for the death of an innocent child, the truth and horror of the thought broke on him like a blast of lightning. He cowered back against the steps, and held up his hand to his head as though to shield off a blow.

"No, no," he cried to himself, "that is not the path to happiness. I have sinned. I must redeem the past. I must do the right thing. I must bow my head. I must make amends. I must act like a man of honour. Then perhaps God in His mercy will give me peace."

Like a man of honour! The thought recalled Leonore, and he could not shut out her face from his eyes. He saw her reproachful look, and heard the piteous tones of her voice. A man of honour would make amends. Perhaps after all this was the thing God willed him to do, this was the sacrifice that he was called upon to make.

And yet, after all, was it such a great sacrifice? She was a good and talented woman, a wife of whom any man might be proud. Laura was lost to him so long as her child and her husband lived, and Tankerlane might easily live for fifty years. She could never be his wife. There was only one course for a wise man to take. He must forget, or, if he could not forget, he must silence the voice of memory with the clamour of another life. This loneliness was hell to him. He would be

happier with a woman who loved him well. She would be a comrade. She would not expect too much. She would be the mother of his children, and a fresh life would open out for him—a quiet domestic life, unruffled by passion, but full of peace and gentle happiness. He had a strong regard for Leonore. He admired her intellect, and though her bitter words had stung him to the quick, he knew that they had only been the cry of a wounded heart.

His meditations were interrupted by the faint sound of footsteps on the gravel, and looking round, he saw Leonore herself walking slowly towards him. Somehow he was not surprised to see her. It seemed quite natural that she should be there.

He rose to his feet and advanced to meet her. As she drew near to him, he noticed that her face was pale and careworn, and that there were dark rings under her eyes. But she smiled as she held out her hand, and he took it in his own.

"I have been expecting you," he said, for all the world as if she were a next-door neighbour who had dropped in to tea. "Come and sit down by the pool. I am very fond of this pool."

She came to the edge without a word and looked at the yellow water eddying against the wall. Then she shuddered.

"I don't like it," she said. "Is it deep? What is it here for?"

"An old bathing place, I believe," he answered. "That water is salt, and comes all the way from the sea. When I look at it I can fancy I am in touch with all the oceans of the world."

"I don't like it," she said quickly, and she seated herself on the wall with her back to the pool. John Shil sat down beside her and for a few moments both of them were silent. The sun had gone down behind the tall fringe of trees, and the smooth green lawns were in shadow.

"You will wonder why I have come here," said Leonore abruptly. "But I have something of importance to tell you, something that I could not write. I cannot stay long, for I must return to town by the last train. Your servants told me you were home, and I took the liberty of coming straight to the place where they said I should find you." She paused, and, clasping her hands, looked on the ground, as though uncertain how to proceed.

"You did right," he replied gently. "I am glad to see you, Leonore."

There was again a pause, and then the woman, realising that the precious moments were being wasted, leant towards him, so that her lips were close to his ear.

"You are in danger," she whispered. "Two men saw all that happened in that wood by Laverstone. I myself know the whole story."

John Shil did not answer, and his face might have been carved out of a piece of granite for all the emotion it displayed. He looked at a flower bed as though the colouring fascinated him.

Then he turned sharply and gripped Leonore by the wrist.

"What do you mean," he asked in a low voice. "What do you know of Laverstone? Who has told you?"

"Please leave go of my wrist," she said quietly. "You are hurting me. I know all the story, but the secret is safe in my hands. In fact, I am paying one of the men to keep his mouth shut."

"What man?" he asked fiercely. "What do you mean? There was no one there; if there had been, he would have spoken, he——" Then the man paused, cursing his own stupidity. He had betrayed himself.

"The man's name is Henry Blurton," she continued. "Do you remember the little drunken cad who recognised you in Widley Street? He saw everything. He has told me all he saw. I have paid him to keep his mouth shut. But the story, told from his standpoint, is incomplete. I am your friend, and I want you to tell me exactly what happened. I want to think well of you. I know that the story of an eye-witness must convey a wrong impression. He knew nothing of what was in your mind, or what passed between you and the other man. I want to know the truth. Please tell me the truth. I am your friend."

John Shil, staggered for the moment by the storm that had suddenly risen up from the past and swept over his head, could make no reply to this appeal. He could not collect and arrange his thoughts. He did not know whether to tell the truth or to keep silence.

"Please tell me," Leonore murmured softly, as she laid her hand on his arm and looked up into his face. "You know that I am your friend."

Her voice and the implied caress in her touch turned the scale. He knew that this woman loved him, and that she

would not do anything to wreck his life. But he was cautious for all that.

"Tell me exactly what you have heard," he said, "and I will then give you the true version of the affair."

She told him the story that she had purchased from Henry Blurton, and when she had finished, John Shil knew well enough that Blurton had been an actual witness of the event. He decided to make a clean breast of the whole affair.

She listened to him in silence, and watched his face as he told the story. When he had finished, she clasped her hands and looked at the trees, with the light of a great joy in her eyes.

"I knew it," she murmured; "I was sure that you had played the man. I am so glad that you have told me the truth—so very glad!"

He looked at her sharply, and was silent. He wished to ask an offensive question without giving offence. For a few moments he had not the courage to speak. Then he realised that he must ask it, if matters were to be cleared up between them.

"Leonore," he said firmly, "will you tell me why you paid Henry Blurton to be silent, and also why you have come here to-day to tell me you did so?"

"I will tell you," she replied humbly, "though in telling you I have to make a confession of my own weakness, of my own evil thoughts. I paid Blurton to be silent, not because I wished to save you from him, but because I wished to possess your secret, because I wanted to have you in my power."

"I understand," he said simply. "At least I think I understand."

"Do you understand what it costs me to tell you this?" she continued. "What a confession it is of impotence, and evil purpose, and shame?"

"There is no shame in confession," he replied. "But will you tell me why you have come here to confess? I am no longer in your power. You have told me the man's name, and I know his address. I can buy his silence, and pay him more than you could ever afford to pay him."

"Again I will tell you the truth," said Leonore, "and this time you must not disbelieve me, merely because the truth is to my credit. I have come here because I do not want to have you in my power, because I am afraid of myself, of what

I may do, of what I may say. I have come here because——” She stared at him for a moment with piteous eyes and parted lips. Then she buried her burning face in her hands, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

“Leonore,” said the man gently, “before you came, I was thinking of you, thinking of myself, of my future life, and how I can use it to the best advantage. I have sinned, and I wish to make amends. Leonore, will you be my wife?”

“Your wife?” she said slowly, as though she could not understand his words. Then she raised her tear-stained cheeks from her hands, and looked at him with frightened eyes. The hour for which she had schemed had come, and yet there was no triumph in her face.

“Yes, Leonore,” he said gently, “if you will marry me, it will bring happiness into my life.”

“No, no!” she cried fiercely, rising to her feet. “You do not ask me because you desire me for a wife. It is because I have shown you what is in my heart, because you pity me. That is why you ask me to be your wife.”

He also rose to his feet, and took one of her hands in his.

“You are mistaken, Leonore,” he replied. “It is for my own happiness that I ask this. You know what little love I have to give, but I will give you all that a man can offer to a woman he respects and admires——”

“Respect and admiration?” she queried passionately.

“Yes,” he answered; “all that a good husband gives to his wife after the first hot blaze of love. I am a lonely man, and your love will mean much to me. Together we will do good in the world, and I will atone for the past, if God will let me make atonement. It is for selfish reasons that I wish to marry you.”

“Selfish?” she cried joyfully. “Ah, that is what I want. That is all I ask. I want to know that you have real need of me, and that you are not trying to force your pity on me.”

“I have real need of you,” he replied. “You may save me from a great sin, for I cannot live this life alone.”

“I will marry you,” she said tenderly. “I will take what love you can give me. I am content.”

He moved closer to her side, and took her in his arms. He could do no less. Her white face looked up to his, and her eyes glowed with passion. Then he bent his head and kissed her on the lips. He had intended that kiss to be a mere

formality, a seal of the compact made between them. But Leonore endowed it with the strength of her passionate love, and clung to him with the frenzy of a woman who has gained the desire of her heart.

Then at last her arms relaxed their hold on his neck, and she sank back on to the low stone wall and buried her face in her hands. The man watched her with fear in his eyes. What had he to offer in return for this? Yet he knew that he must play his part.

"Leonore," he said, with an effort at calmness, "when will you marry me?" He did not know that she was still a married woman, and was not free to marry at all.

"In two months' time," she murmured faintly.

"Two months from to-day?" he queried.

"Yes, two months from to-day. I am going to America next week, and shall be away for a month. I will marry you two months from to-day."

She did not look at him as she answered his question. Her head was turned towards the pool, and she watched the yellow water slowly circling past the walls. He came forward and seated himself by her side.

"Leonore," he said, after a pause, "I ought only to be thinking of you, but there is much else in my mind just now. A little while ago you said that two men saw all that had happened in the wood by Laverstone. We have Henry Blurton safe enough so long as we can buy his silence. But who was the other man?"

"He will also be silent," she replied. "He has sworn an oath to me, and he will keep it."

"What was his name?" persisted John Shil.

"I cannot tell you now," she replied, without taking her eyes from the pool. "One of the conditions he made was that you should never know his name."

The lie came smoothly and readily from her lips. It had to be uttered, for John Shil must never know that Tankerlane had witnessed that scene in the woods. If he once knew the truth, he would realise why Laura had refused to marry him, and his love for the woman who had made this sacrifice would blaze out afresh with still fiercer flames. He might even seek out Sir William Tankerlane, and demand a reckoning.

"No," she said to herself, "for his own sake, he must never learn the truth."

John Shil looked at her averted face with hard, questioning eyes. It was not the look of a lover, nor even of a friend, but his own safety was then uppermost in his mind.

"There should be no secret between us," he said sternly. "Still, if it was a condition——"

She turned slowly and looked at him with the light of love in her eyes.

"Perhaps I may tell you," she whispered, "when we are married. It will be no breach of faith, for we shall then be one."

Then she rose to her feet, and looked at the darkening sky.

"I must go," she said softly. "I will write to you when I come back from America, and to-day two months, that is settled."

She came close to him, and, clinging to his arm, turned her face up to his. Once more he bent his head and kissed her on the lips.

"Good-bye," she said, "my dearest." Then she laughed and looked at the pool. "Even this dismal place seems beautiful," she continued—"beautiful for me. But it has changed. The walls seem higher. There is less water."

John Shil looked at the pool and smiled.

"Yes," he replied; "the tide is ebbing fast. In two hours' time this water will have reached the sea. Good-bye, Leonore, till—but I will walk with you to the house."

They disappeared arm in arm through the trees. And the tide still ebbed out to the sea.



CHAPTER XXI

THE SCOURGE OF GOD

LATE in the autumn, when the leaves had nearly all fallen from the trees, Laura Vane was married to Sir William Tankerlane.

The marriage took place in a registry office, and was carried out with all the secrecy which the law allows to such ceremonies. It was a mere formality, to be forgotten and thrust aside, until some too zealous historian should dig it out of the records of the past. They had both agreed that, as far as the world was concerned, the first marriage was to stand, and the boy was to be proclaimed as their lawful son and heir.

The death of Sir Robert Tankerlane had smoothed down one of the chief difficulties that might have stood in their path. It was easy now for Sir William to say that his father had objected to the match, and that he had kept it a secret for fear of his father's anger. The fact that the Tankerlane estates, unlike most great properties, were not entailed on the heir male, lent additional colour to this falsehood. The fear of disinheritance would seem a strong enough reason for concealing the marriage.

But there was no longer to be any concealment, and even before the two were legally joined together, the romantic story of Sir William Tankerlane's alliance to the daughter of one of his tenants had reached Laverstone. Laura had written at last to her father, and had asked his forgiveness, and had told him most of the truth. Only the one central lie of all remained, and that would have to remain for ever.

Old Sam Vane received the news with sturdy equanimity. He thought less of the splendour of his daughter's marriage than of the small postscript which said that she was well and



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happy. And, above all, he rejoiced in the certainty of her return to Laverstone.

"I'm not saying as I ain't proud of the lass," he said, when old Mr Wingate, the rector, expatiated on the glories of the position to which Laura had attained. "I ain't saying that, sir, though I'm thankful I've had her turned out like a lady as'll grace any gentleman's home. But it's not that I'm thinking of. It's the coming back, and I thank God for it."

Then the news came to Laverstone that Sir William would like a reception on his return to Tankerlane Court. The request came from the mouth of the agent, and was at once interpreted as a command. The tenants on the estate knew but little of their lord and master, and that little was not all to his credit. But most of them had a sincere regard for the daughter of old Sam Vane, and they resolved to give her what they called "a bang-up home-comin'." It is even possible that a little worldly wisdom entered into the kindliness of their thoughts. Even in this enlightened age they were all the subjects of their over-lord, bound to him body and soul.

The arrangements were placed in the hands of a committee, which included four clergymen, seven farmers, and the agent to the Tankerlane estates. As might be imagined, much time was pleasantly wasted in slow speech and controversy, and nothing would ever have been settled if it had not been for the polite but firm insistence of the agent. This worthy young gentleman, who was instructed to provide the funds for everything, was naturally listened to with respect, and when a deadlock ensued, he put in his word with the skill of a trained diplomat, and everyone agreed with him.

There was to be a fête, of course, with unlimited food and beer. There was to be a cricket match, and sports with prizes worth the winning. There were to be swings, and all the fascinations of a fair, which was to be imported wholesale for the occasion. There were to be fireworks—large expensive fireworks. And then, of course, there were to be banners, triumphal arches, a reception at the railway station, the presentation of a wedding present, and all the outward show of homage and loyalty that is offered to a local sovereign.

For three weeks the vast tract of country covered by the Tankerlane property talked of nothing else. And then at last the day came, and for miles round the inhabitants streamed to the railway station to do honour to their new

master. The gentry came in their carriages, the farmers on horseback, or in their gigs, the poorer folk on foot; and there were many on bicycles, from the well-to-do doctor on a machine that glittered with plating and enamel, to the labourer on his rusty piece of scrap iron, that recalled the earliest days of cycling.

Sir William Tankerlane had graciously consented to arrive at the earliest hour possible, so that the people should have a long day in which to enjoy themselves, and the train was expected at 11.32 in the morning.

"This be a proud day for 'ee, Sam Vane," said a farmer, reining in his horse by the side of the old man's trap. "A mortal proud day it must be, for sartin."

"I'm glad to see the lass back," Sam Vane replied with a smile, "and as for pride—well, she be a lass to be proud of, Mr Redholt. What be the time by your watch; I'm thinkin' mine's stopped, or else it's goin' mortal slow this mornin'."

Mr Redholt laughed.

"You're over-impatient, Sam," he replied, looking at his own watch. "It ain't only half-past eleven."

"She should be signalled," growled Mr Vane, "but it ain't to be expected as trains'll allus come up to the mark."

But five minutes passed, then ten, then a quarter of an hour, and still the train was not signalled. The crowd began to show signs of impatience. The gentry hummed and hawed, and disparaged the directors of the company, in which many of them held stock. The rougher element indulged in horse-play to while away the time.

"She'm late," said the station-master in answer to all inquiries.

But a few minutes later he emerged from the booking-office with a white face, and hurried to the side of Sir William Tankerlane's agent.

"There has been an accident to the train," he whispered; "four carriages smashed to bits. Shall I let the people know, or wait for further news?"

But the whisper, soft as it had been, had reached the ears of a bystander, and almost before the agent could make reply the news had spread through the waiting crowd.

Men looked at each other in horror, and women chattered and clung to each other as though some danger threatened them. On all sides rose the one question, put in various forms, and asked in various tones:



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"Sir William and his lady—are they safe?"

But there were some among the crowd who had friends and relations of their own in the train, and they gave no thought to Sir William or Lady Tankerlane. They besieged the station-master with questions, and he, poor, patient man, half distracted by the turmoil, lost his head, and gave them answers that drew down wrath upon his head.

The attitude of the crowd became sullen and even hostile. Some of them cursed the directors of the line, and were of opinion that someone should be punished for all this.

"It's a fine day," growled one old man, "and liker June than Oct'ber. It'd ha' been a grand day for a feet, if them railway folk hadn't bin and spiled it."

And he voiced the sentiments of the lower classes, dull workers that had looked forward to a little merriment in their dreary lives, and thought nothing of the horrors that lay across the railway line thirty miles away from them.

"If he'm killed," asked another, "who'd rightly come into the property?"

"The child, of course," replied another, "he'd be a chanc'ry, he would, and we'd never have a soul to look arter us, till he was come to manhood."

"But belike the child's killed, too."

"Then a cousin'd have the lot, some feller as don't know a blade of grass from a blackberry—a clerk, mebbe."

But all further speculation as to the destination of the Tankerlane estates was brought to an end by the agent, who came on to the steps of the station with a genial look on his face, and waved a telegram above his head.

"I have good news for you," he cried out, as he faced the crowd. "Sir William and Lady Tankerlane are much shaken but unhurt. They cannot get here to-day, as Lady Tankerlane cannot undertake the journey. They both, however, send you their best wishes for a happy day. The fête will take place, as originally arranged."

A loud cheer broke from the crowd, and it began to disperse. After all, the presence of their lord and master was not indispensable to their happiness. His absence would, on the contrary, remove some of the stiff formality of the proceedings. The beer would flow well enough without him, and the fireworks would blaze and bang right merrily.

But when the agent turned away from the crowd, the smile

died from his face. And there were tears in the eyes of the station-master, who stood behind him.

"She's a brick," said the agent gruffly, "a regular brick. Go and fetch Sam Vane, will you."

And when the old farmer came, the agent drew him aside and told him the truth.

"Your daughter is all right," he said gently, "and Sir William has escaped with a few bruises. But the child is dead. I had special instructions to withhold this last piece of news. Lady Tankerlane wishes the people to enjoy themselves. They will be down here the day after to-morrow, and the funeral will take place here."

And all day long the people shouted and ran races, and drank and ate as much as they could hold, and all day long the banners floated in the breeze and the band played popular music with cheerful inaccuracy.

But thirty miles away Laura Tankerlane leant over the dead body of her little child, and cried out to God to restore the life that He had given and taken away. And so bitter was her sorrow that she did not even remember how she had sacrificed herself for the sake of this little child, and how all her sacrifice had been in vain.



CHAPTER XXII

THE BLASPHEMER

Two days after the railway accident Laura and her husband returned to Tankerlane Court, and brought with them the body of their child. Long before they arrived the whole district was in possession of the news, but the people did not know that the information had been concealed from them. It was reported that the unfortunate victim had died some hours after the disaster.

When the train reached the station it was dark, and the platform was deserted, save for the station-master, a porter, Mr Danby, the agent, and four stolid-looking men dressed in black. It was drizzling with rain, and the water ran from the roof of the building in tiny streams that sparkled in the light of the oil lamps.

Danby came forward to meet them, hat in hand, murmured a few words to Sir William, and then led the four sombre-visaged men to a carriage, where the guard and porter stood with bared heads.

Then the men took out the tiny coffin—any one of them could have lifted it with one hand—and they slowly carried it to the hearse, which was waiting outside. The two parents followed, and not till they had disappeared, did the guard blow his whistle. Then several of the passengers, who had been looking out of the window, withdrew their heads, and the train proceeded on its way. The porter turned out the lights, and then went off to his supper.

Such was the home-coming of the Tankerlanes, rulers of all the land as far as a man might ride in a single day, yet in their sorrow less to be envied than the poorest tenant on their estate. For the grief of the labourer is short, and is lightened by the knowledge that there is one less mouth to feed. But the grief

of these two was hard, silent, and terrible. They could not even turn to one another for sympathy. Each had to bear the burden alone.

They had spoken but little to each other since they had first looked on the dead body of their child, and only the most commonplace remarks had passed between them. And the saddest thing of all was that an event which should have drawn them together with the bonds of a common sorrow, had apparently only set them further apart.

Laura had not shed a single tear since the first wild outburst of weeping. But her white, hard face, and the silent agony in her eyes had testified to the awful strength of her grief. She had even refused to see her father till after the funeral.

But when the quiet and simple ceremony was over, she allowed her husband to return to Tankerlane Court alone, and she drove back with Sam Vane to the farmhouse where she had been born.

"Poor thing," said the wife of a labourer, as she watched the carriages leave the gate of the churchyard. "It's comfort she's wanting with that hard face. It's a good cry'd do her good."

"Seems to me," replied her husband slowly, "as it's the judgment of the Almighty. Nothing good ever came of them secret marriages. I don't hold with hidin' things up."

"Then you baint a Christian," his wife retorted hotly. "Them thoughts didn't come to you fête time, when you drunk more of his beer than was good for you, and I had to lead you home like a dog. That's not Christian charity. If I were you, I'd pray for 'em both next Sunday in church, and ask pardon at same time, for un-Christian back-biting."

The man spat on the ground, and followed his wife meekly up the village. But his words had voiced the common sentiment. The death of the child was the "Judgment of God." Somehow, it had transpired that the two bereaved parents had not been united in a church, and a registry office, to those who had never seen one, savoured of actual immorality.

But Laura, who neither knew nor cared anything for the popular verdict on her bereavement, drove back in silence to the farmhouse under the hill, and when she and her father were alone in the same room, where she had sung Tosti's "Good-bye" more than two years ago, her grief found vent at

last in tears, and she broke out into a storm of weeping that convulsed her whole body.

Old Sam Vane took her in his arms, and spoke to her as he had often spoken in the days of her childhood, when some tiny grief had brought tears to her eyes.

"There, there, Laurie," he said gently, "'twill all be well with 'ee, see if it won't. 'Tis the Lord's will, little one, the Lord's will, and 'tain't for us to cry out."

"Oh, you do not know," she moaned; "you do not know." And then, thrusting his arms away from her, she clasped her hands together in a wild fury of grief. "Oh God," she cried, "what have I done? Where was the sin? Where was the sin?"

Her father looked at her in terror. Her eyes glittered with the light of madness, and a tress of her glorious auburn hair, loosened by a wild thrust of her hand, had fallen over her shoulders. She looked like some fallen angel breathing out rebellion against God.

"Laurie, Laurie," cried her father, "you must be yourself, child; you must not look like that. 'Tis the will of the Lord, the will of the Lord."

"There is no God," she answered coldly, and her voice was more terrible in its calmness than in its fury. "No God would suffer such things in this world. I say that there is no God, and I mean it from the bottom of my heart."

Alas, poor soul, like many a one before her, she fancied for the moment that she was the central fact in the scheme of creation, and that the Justice of the Universe must stand or fall on the merits of her own individual case.

"Silence, child," said her father sternly, "are you seeking the portion of the blasphemer? I will not listen to 'ee, Laurie, and if you talks like that in my hearin', you leave my house. I thought 'ee had more grit. 'Twarn't thus I spoke when your mother died—my dear old comrade of twenty year'n more. 'Tis the Lord's will that those we love shall leave us."

He spoke harshly, though his heart ached for his daughter's misery. His shrewd mind already guessed that there was something more in the girl's heart than sorrow for the loss of her child. But he forebore to aggravate her grief with any attempt to learn the cause of it.

"'Tis the Lord's will, Laurie," he repeated more gently, and these words represented all the philosophy of his simple life.

She did not answer him, but, seating herself in a chair, she gazed round the room, as though trying to find something which might divert her thoughts from her present sorrow. Her father watched her anxiously.

"It all looks the same," she said, after a long pause. "Tell me all about yourself, father. I did not come here to make you miserable. I came to receive your forgiveness."

"You've had that a long time, child," the old man answered, "though I don't deny as it were hard at first and mortal lonely."

"I know, I know," she cried. "I am ashamed of myself. But he would not let me write. Old Sir Robert——" She paused. She had no wish to utter the lie in so many words, and her father would understand.

"Ay, he were a proud man," Sam Vane said grimly. "But tell me, Laurie——"

"There is nothing to tell," she interrupted quickly. "I want to hear all about yourself."

He told her the story of his quiet, hard-lived life during the past two years. It was dull, monotonous, and unrelieved by any event of importance. The death of a favourite horse, the failure of a potato crop, the incompetency of the women who had succeeded Laura in the dairy work, these were the tragedies of the story. But Laura did not smile as she listened to them. She knew the great tragedy of his life had been real enough, and, though he did not speak of it, she could see the marks of it on his face. And the thought of it was yet another burden that she had to bear, yet another cause of self-reproach, yet another instance of the cruelty of fate.

When he had finished his dull little narrative, they were both silent. Then Laura rose to her feet, and, crossing over to his chair, placed her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

"Dear old father," she said tenderly, "you seem to be the only sure and constant thing in the world. Everything else changes, and slips away from under one's feet, but in spite of all my sins your love remains—only your love remains."

"Tush, tush, child!" he replied. "You've a great and fine life before you. You'll have the power of doin' good to a lot of folk as needs it. And you've your husband, and I know well he loves you. Men in his position don't marry farmers' daughters unless they love them. God has given you a good husband, lass, and, if He has thought fit to take the

little one from 'ee—well, that is for the best ; sure sartin that is for the best. You must think of your husband, lass. You need each other now. There was a power of sorrow in that hard face of his. Your place is by his side."

"My place is by his side," she repeated mechanically, like a parrot trying to learn some set form of words.

The old man rose to his feet and looked hard in her face.

"Is he not good to 'ee, lass?" he asked.

"He is very good."

"And he loves 'ee, too ; I know it."

"Yes, father, he loves me."

"And it is to him you'll go and find comfort, lass?"

She was silent and turned away her head.

"Don't you love him, lass?" he asked sadly.

She was still silent.

"Don't you love him as you've sworn to love and honour and obey?"

"We were married in a registry office," replied Laura coldly ;

"I did not swear to love him."

"Then you've sold yourself to him for his money, his broad lands, his name—and your heart—oh, Laurie, may the Lord have pity on you!"

"He has punished me," she replied in a dull voice.

Sam Vane placed his hands on her shoulders and looked gravely into her white face.

"Go home, lass," he said sternly, "and God forgive you. Go to your husband and give him the love he needs. Now is the time, Laurie—in the hour of sorrow, when the heart is sore and tender. Go to him, lass. He will welcome you. I've seen it in his face. You should be all in all to each other at a time like this."

"I will go," she said wearily. "Good-bye, father, dear."

"Good-bye, child," he said gently, "and remember 'tis all the Lord's will."

He kissed her tenderly, and saw her into the carriage which was waiting at the door. And a quarter of an hour afterwards she was at Tankerlane Court.

"Where is Sir William?" she asked a footman, as she crossed the threshold of her home.

"In the library, my lady," the man replied.

She made her way to the library door, and then, turning back, went up to her bedroom. She had resolved to make

peace with her husband, and give him the sympathy of a loving wife. It would not come from the heart, but, glossed over with the emotion of the moment, it would pass for the real thing. It was the only course open to her. Life would be unbearable without a better and kindlier understanding between them. This was the hour, the appointed time. If she let this opportunity slip it would never come again. And yet she was afraid to enter the library, and went up to her bedroom to pray for strength.

Long and earnestly she prayed, asking for forgiveness and help in her difficulties.

"Oh God!" she cried, "if I have blasphemed Thee, I ask for pardon. If I have sinned, forgive me. But keep me from temptation; teach me, too, to forgive and forget. Let me do my duty as a wife and the mother of the child Thou hast taken from me."

She bowed her head in silence, and then, moved by a swift impulse, that came almost as if in answer to her prayer, she hurried downstairs, and opened the library door.

Her husband was sitting in a chair by one of the windows. On a small table by his side was a half-empty bottle of brandy. His flushed cheeks and the dull, stupid look in his eyes told Laura the truth. He was drunk, within an hour of his child's funeral.

But Laura, brave in the strength of her resolution, crossed fearlessly to his side. He did not even look at her.

"I have come back, dear," she said nervously, and then paused.

"Very kind of you," he growled, in a thick voice. "Well, you can clear out, and be damned to you!"

She looked for a moment into his bloodshot eyes. Then she left the room and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONG GREY NIGHT

FOR two days Laura Tankerlane refused to see her husband, and had all her meals sent up to her room ; and during these two days her mind sank back into the darkness from which one brief moment of brave resolve had lifted it. And the darkness was more terrible and overwhelming than it had ever been.

"There is no God," was again the bitter cry of her heart, "or, if there is a God, He has forsaken me. I am alone, and there is no one to help me."

Her mind, already clouded by her long sufferings, by her useless sacrifice, and by the death of her child, was now plunged in a still deeper shadow. She had made an effort at reconciliation, and had been repulsed. For the first time in her life she had used a term of endearment to her husband, and he had answered it with a brutal oath. A woman in a more reasonable frame of mind would have remembered that Sir William Tankerlane, who was also distraught with grief, and who still smarted under his wife's previous coldness, was in no fit state to control either his language or his actions. He had drunk heavily to drown his sorrow, and was ashamed of his words as soon as they had left his lips.

But Laura remembered none of this ; she only recalled the brutality of his language, and the disgusting spectacle which had greeted her eyes as she had entered the room. She had made up her mind to have no more to do with him ; to live with him at Tankerlane Court, so as to avoid a public scandal, but to live her own life apart.

If this state of mind had continued, it would merely have concerned herself and her husband. It would have implied a certain resignation to the blows of fate ; it would have shown

a certain dogged courage which had marked out a dreary path for itself, and had resolved to follow it to the end—a path beset with difficulty, but which could be trodden alone through all the long, grey night.

But a more selfish and more evil thought had already come into the mind of the distracted woman. "Why," she argued to herself, "should I let myself be broken on the wheel? Have I no strength to resist? Am I too weak to control my own destiny? Why should I be crushed without an effort to get some happiness out of life? Why should I not rebel, take my fate in my own hands, and defy all the powers that wish to destroy me?"

These wild and reckless thoughts leapt through her brain like fire, and cast lurid pictures on the dark background of her future life. She saw the face of John Shil, and the fierce passion in his eyes. She saw a home in some distant land, where none could interfere with their happiness. She saw peace, and all the quiet content of love. And, as she saw these pictures—mere phantoms of the brain—she realised that all the realities were within her reach, if she dared to stretch out her hand and grasp them. She saw that a single word would bring John Shil to her side, and that he would care nothing for public scandal; that he would count the world well lost for love. She had but to lift her finger, and light would stream through the darkness over her head, the past would shrink away from her into the gloom behind, and the future would lie clear and sweet in the sunshine.

And the price? What would it cost to turn this dream of happiness into an actual fact? A broken oath? Not even that, for she had only sworn to marry Tankerlane, and she had already married him. A stain on her honour? Tankerlane himself had dishonoured her. The life and happiness of the man she loved? Ah, there was the difficulty; there was the crux of the whole problem. It was to save her lover that she had sacrificed herself in the first instance. Perhaps if she deserted her husband, she would undo all the good she had done. She knew nothing of the oath he had sworn to Leonore.

And through all the dreary hours the visions of future happiness flashed up and disappeared like the gleams of a revolving light. She had thrust aside the distinction between good and evil. She did not wish to know what religion or

morality or honour required of her. All thoughts of duty to either God or man had been buried in that tiny grave in the Laverstone churchyard. She only wanted to know what would bring most happiness to herself and the man she loved.

But at the end of the two days she had come to no definite decision. The wheel of her thoughts revolved continually, and she always came back to the point from which she had started.

On the third day, however, Sir William Tankerlane asserted his authority as master of the house, and insisted on an interview with his wife.

"Laura," he said humbly, as he entered her room and closed the door behind him, "I am sorry that I had to insist on seeing you. But it is impossible for us to go on like this. I behaved like a brute the other night. But I was not in my right senses at the time. The way you left me after the funeral to return here alone, the thought of the poor little kid—I had to stupefy my brain with drink. I don't excuse myself, but I ask for your forgiveness."

Laura did not answer him, and she did not even turn her head towards him. She was seated in a large arm-chair facing the window, and she stared out at the trees in the park; her hands were folded listlessly in her lap, and her whole attitude was one of dreamy indifference. She seemed singularly beautiful in her deep mourning. The black dress set off the whiteness of her skin, and the glinting copper of her hair.

The man paused for a second, and bit his lips with vexation. Then he crossed the room to her side.

"Laurie," he said gently, "have you nothing to say to me?"

"Nothing," she replied, without turning her head.

"Does that mean you refuse to forgive me?"

"It means that I cannot forget."

He seated himself in a chair facing her, and looked into her hard, pitiless eyes.

"Laurie," he said slowly, "we cannot go on like this. It will make life unbearable for both of us."

"You knew what to expect," she replied. "You can hardly have expected me to love you."

"I knew what to expect," he said gravely, "but when the child died, I thought that perhaps—oh, can't you understand, Laurie? It was our child—not yours, not mine, but ours. And I hoped that the loss might bring us nearer together."

"It has set us farther apart," she answered coldly. "It was for the sake of the child that I married you. And now——" She looked at him for a moment in hatred, and then rose to her feet. "You see how God has approved of my sacrifice," she cried fiercely. "But I am not crushed yet. I still have strength to live my own life. All the better part of me is dead. It was buried yonder—in the churchyard. I gave myself to you for the sake of my son. There is no reason now why I should stay with you."

"Only your duty as a wife," the man replied.

"Duty!" she exclaimed. "I have done my duty, and see how acceptable it has been in the sight of God. I can promise you that henceforth duty will not trouble me; that I have no conscience, no honour, no regard for anyone but myself. My whole life has been a sacrifice—and it has been all in vain."

"May I ask what you intend to do?" he said calmly. "What does all this high-flown speech boil down to? Tell me plainly what you are going to do? We may as well be honest with each other."

"I do not know yet what I am going to do," she replied. "It is possible that I may leave you, and find the happiness that I can never find here."

"In other words," said Tankerlane, "you are thinking of John Shil."

She did not answer, but, moving closer to the window, she looked out across the park. In the distance the spire of the village church was plainly visible through a network of leafless trees.

"I shouldn't go to John Shil, if I were you," he continued. "It would not be to his advantage."

She turned on him savagely. "Ah, you'd speak, would you," she cried. "But your oath holds good."

"I am not sure that it does," he replied, "but, even if I break it, I shall only be following your example. Perhaps I, too, am in that frame of mind which can fling honour and morality to the four winds of heaven."

"Please leave me," she said faintly; "I did not seek this interview. It is cruel at such a time as this. It is an insult to our dead child. Please leave me. I shall do nothing yet. I must have time to think."

"Laurie!" he cried passionately. "You know how I love you!"

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She was silent, and, walking away from him, picked up a book, and opened it.

He glanced at her for a moment, then the look of entreaty on his face changed to a hard smile, and he left the room.

For a whole month Laura remained at Tankerlane Court. She was rarely seen outside the house, and never outside the grounds. Her father was the only visitor that she ever received, and, though she welcomed his visits as a relief from the monotony of her life, she never opened her heart to him, and the old man prayed in vain for some softening influence on the apparent hardness of her nature.

In the neighbourhood it was rumoured that Lady Tankerlane's mind had become unhinged by the death of her child. It was only natural that she should cut herself off from all society; but the servants' gossip had revealed a most unnatural state of affairs at Tankerlane Court. It was reported that Sir William Tankerlane and his wife never met, and lived separate lives in the same house. That this should be the case, in the face of the recent sad event which ought to have drawn husband and wife more closely together, set many tongues wagging. And Lady Tankerlane formed a staple subject of conversation, both at the dinner tables of the rich and in the public-houses of the entire district.

"There's something at the bottom of all this," was the verdict among her social equals.

"'Tis the judgment of the Lord," was the opinion of the lower classes, who are always well informed as to the intentions of the Almighty.

"My poor child," cried old Sam Vane, in the silence and solitude of his home. "Oh Lord, have mercy on her in her hour of trouble."

But Laura herself lived her own dull monotonous life, as though every minute of it were a task that she had to perform against her will. Dreary day succeeded dreary day, and the only hours of peace were the hours of sleep. Remorse, regret, bitterness of spirit, rebellion against the world and Him who made it—these were the devils that had taken up their abode in her heart. And their voices shrieked and babbled through all the long grey night.

Then one evening she found a newspaper laid upon her dinner table. A small paragraph was carefully marked in blue pencil, and as she read it, the hot blood rushed to her cheeks

and the paper trembled in her hands. The paragraph, which was part of a column of society news, announced the engagement of Mr John Shil to the well-known actress, Miss Leonore Jackson.

For a few moments Laura stood motionless. Her powers of thought and movement were paralysed. The lines of print danced before her eyes against a crimson background, like devils dancing in the flames of hell.

Then she walked unsteadily to the bell and rang it.

"Who sent this paper up here?" she asked the maid who answered the bell.

"Sir William sent it, my lady."

"Thank you," Laura said curtly. "You can go."

And when the girl had left the room, Laura Tankerlane laughed, and, going to a sideboard, poured herself out a tumblerful of wine, and drank half of it at a single gulp. The news, instead of reconciling her to her marriage with Sir William, had fired her mind into a white hot flame of fury. So long as John Shil was free she could wait, she could drag out the weary hours in the hope that time would set all things right at last. But if John Shil once married this other woman, he would be lost to her for ever.

"I will take him from her," she cried; "I will have no pity. What a fool I was to listen to her pleadings! Yet who could imagine that any woman would be so vile? I will take him. I will live my own life. All else can go to the wall. Here's an end to the long grey night, an end to sorrow, an end to dull respectability and honour, and prudence, and all the words that men have coined to make slaves of their womenkind. Here's an end to it all, I say, an end to the night; and here's to the health of the dawn—the dawn of love."

She raised the glass to her lips, and then, as though seized with a sudden madness, she flung it on the table, and the red wine spurted up from the cloth like blood.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CRIMSON DAWN

FAR away across the grey eastern sea the first gleam of a winter's dawn was tinging the sky with a flush of pale rose. The marshland, dreary enough in the summer sunshine, looked cold and ghastly in the dim light of a December morning. The flat ground was carpeted with mist, not thick enough to conceal its ugliness, but sufficiently dense to suggest the damp rawness of the atmosphere. The creeks, full to the brim with water, were leaden in colour, and looked as if a few ice floes would be in keeping with their temperature.

The silence of the night was giving place to the first whispers of day. A few seagulls circled in the air, and wailed out a dismal greeting to the sun. A faint breeze hissed through the reeds and sedge; and the water of the creeks, stirred into tiny waves, splashed gently on the banks of mud.

It was not a scene to tempt anyone from a warm bed, or even the cheerful shelter of good stone walls. Yet John Shil had been lying out all night in a punt, and, after the darkness, even this grim dawn had a certain aspect of geniality. He had ostensibly spent his night in the marshes to shoot wild duck, but he had not even heard the whirr of their wings. Yet he felt that he had not wasted his time, for he had been unable to sleep, and the very atmosphere of the house had seemed to crush all the life out of him. Who does not remember such nights as these—nights in which the air presses down like a thick pall of velvet, nights in which the brain runs riot and the body cannot rest. They come, regardless of season, in summer or winter; the stifling pressure is from within and not from the atmosphere without. John Shil, after two hours of unutterable depression, had risen and dressed himself; and an hour later he was lying in his punt in a creek about half a

mile from the house, with a retriever by his side, and a gun in his hands.

Yet no ducks had come his way that night, and he might as well have left his gun at home. Pat, the retriever, however, had been a welcome companion, for even a sleeping dog is company.

As the dawn broke, John Shil threw off the heavy rug which had covered his legs, and, lighting his pipe, stood up in the punt and surveyed the dreary scene which was gradually unfolding itself before his eyes.

The rose pink of the eastern sky deepened to crimson, and then the sun came up from the sea like a ball of fire, twice its natural size, and, to Shil's mind, hideously ugly and unromantic.

But a winter's dawn is not destined to be clear and sparkling. A heavy bank of clouds was already descending to meet the sun, and before the red circle was fully visible above the horizon, the bank seemed to crash down on it and blot it out of existence.

A look of pain came into Shil's eyes, as he saw the crimson light vanish beneath the cloudbank. He wondered if it was an omen of the life which lay before him.

Then he laughed, and taking up the heavy pair of sculls, he rowed the punt vigorously up the creek. The exercise put warmth into his chilled body, and dispelled the gloom which had come over his thoughts.

As he neared the edge of the park, the creek narrowed to a mere ditch, and it was impossible to scull any further. John Shil rose to his feet, and, facing the bow of the boat, began to use one of the sculls as a pole. Then he looked up and saw the dim figure of a woman crouching close to the wall, and scarcely visible against the grey background of stone.

The woman under the trees did not move as John Shil moored his punt to a small wooden quay, and stepped ashore with the gun under his arm. But his curiosity was aroused, and he walked towards her across the grass which fringed the road. It was an early hour for a woman to be abroad, and it was hard to imagine what business could have brought her to the edge of the marshland. As he came within a few yards of her, the retriever ran forward and barked. The woman raised her head, and stood upright with her back to the wall, as though face to face with an enemy.

John Shil stopped for a moment, and not a muscle of his face

or body moved. He might have been carved out of stone. And the dog also stopped, head thrust forward, and nose to the ground, after the manner of his kind. And Laura Tankerlane stood motionless against the wall. The whole picture might have been painted on canvas.

Then suddenly life returned to the little group. Laura moved a pace forward and held out her hand.

The man was the first to speak, though the shock of the meeting had fallen most heavily on his head. He had not seen the woman he loved since the hour when they parted at Laverstone. Lately, when he had thought of her, he had pictured her as the wife of Sir William Tankerlane, reconciled to her fate by the presence of her child, and securely settled as the mistress of Tankerlane Court. But the woman, who stood before him, was white and haggard and worn; there was a look of terror in her eyes, and her whole demeanour was that of one who had sinned, and has yet the consequences of her sin to face.

"Laura!" he cried hoarsely, as he moved towards her. "What are you doing here? Am I dreaming? Surely—what does it mean—why have you come here?"

She still held out her hand in silence, and, as he grasped it in his own strong fingers, the coldness of it struck a chill to his heart.

"Laurie," he said gently, "what is it, dear? What are you doing here? Where is your husband?"

"I have left my husband," she replied coldly.

"And the child?" he asked. "Have you left the child?"

She looked at him in horror and amazement. She could not realise that he was ignorant of an event which had altered the whole course of her life; she gave a little moan of pain, and then, wrenching her hand from his grasp, she turned away from him, and staggered back against the wall.

"Laurie, Laurie," he cried in distress, "what is it? What have I said?"

"The child is dead," she replied in a low voice.

"Dead!" he echoed, "the child dead?" He understood now why she had come to him. The barrier that had kept them apart was broken.

"Yes," she continued. "Did you not know? Did you not see it in the papers? Leonore knew, for she wrote me a letter—such a sweet letter of sympathy."

"Leonore knew?" he stammered. "And she did not tell me?"

"Of course she did not tell you," Laura replied. "She knew well enough what it would mean to you and me. It was she who persuaded me to marry William Tankerlane."

"Laurie, Laurie," he cried, "are you mad? What do you mean? I don't understand you. Why, you did not even know Leonore when you married Tankerlane."

"Oh, I had forgotten," she answered wearily. "Of course you do not know. But I have come here to tell you everything—only not here. There is no time. My husband will come down to Black Hall to find me. You must take me somewhere, to some place where he will not find me, some place where I can see you and tell you everything. If he finds me with you, he will kill you."

"He will find it a tough job," said Shil drily.

"Oh, you do not know. You are in his power. I will tell you everything. But get me away from here. I came down to Gorehaven by a late train last night, and have walked over here. I have been walking all night."

"Walked, Laurie? It is twenty miles from Gorehaven."

"Yes, yes, but I had to do it. I had to put him off the scent—oh, please take me somewhere. I have not seen a soul as yet. No one knows I am here. If you can only get me to a safe place, I will tell you everything. But I am tired out, hungry, cold."

"Poor child," he said tenderly, and then he looked across the marshland, as though expecting to find some solution of the difficulty that confronted him. As his eyes fell on the punt they brightened, and an idea struck him.

"Get into my boat," he said abruptly, "I will take you to a place where you will be comfortable, and where the people, though they are rough fisher folk, will look after you well. No one will ever think of looking for you there, and I will call and see you at any time you please. No one will speak a word if I tell them to be silent. They are tenants of mine, and the man is devoted to me. Have you anything with you—a box—no, of course you haven't."

"I have nothing," she replied, as they moved down to the little quay. "My only thought was to get away, to hide myself from my husband, to see you and tell you everything. Let us be quick. Shall we be seen? Is there anyone about

yet?" She spoke rapidly and nervously, and looked round at the fringe of trees behind them.

"There is no one about," he said quietly, "and we shall not meet anyone on the way. We are going to leave civilisation behind us. I am going to take you, Laurie, into the desolation of a wilderness."

He helped her into the punt and arranged the rug so that she could lie down on it and wrap it round her body. Then he called to the dog, who was regarding the proceedings with large wistful eyes, and unfastened the rope which held the boat to the quay. Pat leapt on board and ensconced himself on the rug by Laura's side, and the boat drifted slowly down on the ebb tide.

"There's a fair wind down the creek," said Shil; "I'll put up the sail, and keep my strength for the last bit of the journey, which will be against wind and tide."

He fixed up a short thick mast in the bows, and hoisted a lug sail. When he had made the halliard fast, he came aft with the sheet, and, taking one of the oars, placed it over the stern, and used it as a rudder.

"We shall slip down in no time now," he said cheerfully. "You'd better rest, Laurie, and try to get a bit of sleep. Directly we arrive, we'll get some breakfast. I've been out all night myself."

He spoke gently, almost tenderly. Laura, who had not heard his voice for more than two years, almost fancied they were back in the Stonewold Hills in the early days of their friendship, when there was as yet no talk of love between them. There was no passion in his voice, no sorrow, only kind sympathy and friendly care for her comfort.

"I am dead beat," she replied with a smile. "I will try and sleep. Good night, Jack."

The sound of his Christian name sent the blood to his cheeks, and for a moment his hand was unsteady on the oar. He longed to rise to his feet, and kneel by her side, and kiss her lips, and hold her in his arms. But his strong will kept his passions in check, and he merely smiled back at her.

"Good night," he said merrily. "Sleep well."

And in less than five minutes she was asleep, and Shil's hungry eyes were fixed on her face. Fortunately for him there was a fair wind and tide, and an ever-widening creek before him. The boat required little or no attention, for she only

drew six inches of water, and the creek, right up to the very banks, was as good as open sea to her. It did not even matter if she gybed, as the spars were so light in comparison to the weight of the hull, that this accident, feared by all sailors when running before the wind, would have had no effect on her stability.

And so these two drifted down the tide, the woman asleep and dreaming of the happiness within her grasp, and the man with his eyes fixed on the white, lovely face and the crown of auburn hair. Surely, he thought to himself, even the Lady of Shalott did not look more beautiful than this.

Then suddenly the sun thrust its head over the bank of clouds, and land and water sparkled at the sight of it, and the clouds themselves were fringed with crimson and gold. Laura's hair glittered like burnished copper, and her pale face gleamed like marble against the black rug.

Alas, Leonore, for all your plans, and all the schemes of your passionate heart. These two are drifting together down the tide, and the sunlight is on their path.

CHAPTER XXV

CONASEA ISLAND

JOHN SHIL had spoken truly when he had told Laura that he was going to take her into the desolation of the wilderness, for the large tract of land that lay between Black Hall and the sea was almost as flat and lonely as the Sahara Desert. On both sides of the creek stretched what appeared to be an interminable waste of grass and reeds. Not a hut, not a tree, not a hedge or bush broke the monotony of its level surface. Neither man nor animal moved across it. From the boat it appeared to be an unbroken and empty field, many thousand acres in extent, but viewed from a greater height, it would have resolved itself into a mass of small islands, divided by innumerable creeks and ditches and gullies. At high tide—or rather from half-flood to half-ebb—these islands fulfilled the geographical definition and were entirely surrounded by water. But from half-ebb to half-flood most of them were separated from each other by ravines, dry, inasmuch as the water had flowed out of them, but impassable owing to the deep liquid mud which lined them to a depth of several feet.

In summer the whole land was made pleasant by a mauve carpet of sea lavender, and in autumn the glasswort splashed the scene with crimson. But there was nothing beautiful in the winter, nothing but a dreary waste of green and brown.

In less than an hour the boat had travelled nearly eight miles, and its bow was dipping in the green waves of the sea. The yellow tinge had faded from the water, for the creek was more than a mile wide at the point, and there were eight fathoms of water under the boat's keel. John Shil altered his course to the north, and the little craft moved crab-wise across the estuary, sagging eastward with the strong sweep of the tide,

and making so much leeway, that she went two feet sideways to every one that she forged ahead.

He had judged his distance correctly, however, and he just fetched the mouth of a smaller creek which joined the main estuary on the other side. Then he dropped a tiny anchor, so as to lose no ground, for the tide was sluicing past him like a mill-race. When he had done this, he stepped for'ard and touched Laura gently on the shoulder. The time had come to row against the wind and tide, and he could not do it while she lay full length in the boat.

She did not stir, though the noise of the sail flapping in the wind might have roused Rip Van Winkle himself from sleep. John Shil lowered the fluttering canvas, and stowed it away by her side. Then he unstepped the mast and laid it on the top of the sail. Then he looked down at Laura, who still slumbered peacefully.

And as he looked, he could no longer restrain the passion that was in his heart. He knelt down by her side, and kissed her gently on the lips. And then Laura Tankerlane awoke.

He rose sharply to his feet, and busied himself with a rope.

"I'm afraid I must disturb you," he said, without looking at her. "I have to row now, and I can't do it, unless you move."

She sat up and pressed her hands to her eyes. Her cheeks were crimson, and her heart beat like a hammer.

"I have been dreaming," she said faintly. She knew well enough that it had been no dream, but she did not wish her lover to think that she knew.

"It will take us an hour to get there," he said, "but you can see the house from here."

Laura rose to her feet, and, looking up the narrow creek, saw a low black building, just showing its first-floor windows above a high bank.

"It looks very close," she said. "Couldn't we land here and walk along the bank?"

"Impossible," he replied; "I am not an Essex man, but I have lived here long enough to know that much. There are half a dozen little creeks to be crossed before you get there, and it is impossible to cross even the first of them. No, I must pull you up. The exercise will do me good. Will you please sit in the stern?"

When she had obeyed his instructions, he got the anchor on board, and moving quickly on to the thwart, shipped the sculls.

But quick though he had been, the boat had slipped a dozen yards down the stream before the blades of his oars gripped the water. Then he set to work in grim earnest, and exerted all his great strength to force the punt through the sluicing tide.

In less than an hour he reached a small "hard"—a firm path of shingle running out from the bank through the soft deep mud on either side. As the bow of the punt grated on the stones, a dog barked furiously, and Pat sprang to his feet with the hair ruffling on his back.

A second later a black and tan collie sprang over the edge of the bank, and showed his white teeth. Then the bulky figure of a man appeared, and, as he saw John Shil, he touched his hat, gave the dog a kick, and hurried down the narrow causeway.

"You are early, s'mornin', sir," he said, as he laid hold of the boat and pulled it farther up the "hard." His brown, weather-beaten face betrayed no surprise at Laura's presence. He helped her out of the punt, as though he had been expecting her arrival.

"Walk straight up," said John Shil to Laura; "I'll be with you in a minute."

She took the hint, and, strolling quietly up the path, climbed to the top of the bank and surveyed the dreary stretch of marshland around her. From that point of vantage she could see that she was on a large island. Eight feet below her there was a small black house, built of tarred wood. A woman stood at the doorway scattering grain to a crowd of hungry fowls. The collie sat a few yards away from her and snarled at Pat, who regarded him with well-bred contempt.

In less than a minute John Shil and the man, who appeared to be half-sailor and half-farmer, came up to her, and the man touched his hat.

"Mrs Dowsett will be glad to put you up," said John Shil with a smile, "and you ought to get all the rest here you want. It's quiet enough. Dowsett, this is Miss Laura Vane, and your missus has got to look after her as if she were a daughter."

The man bowed gravely. A Londoner might have smiled, or even winked. But this stolid fellow, who had passed all his life at sea or on the grim flats of Essex, had acquired some of the silence of his surroundings. And, as Laura looked at him, she knew that she was in the hands of one who would do all that he was told, and say nothing about it.

"Miss Vane," continued Shil, "is very hungry, and so am I. I daresay Mrs Dowsett can get us some breakfast."

"Eggs and a bit of fish, sir, I've no doubt," the man replied.

They descended the steep bank, which kept the waters of the creek from overflowing the marshland, and Mrs Dowsett, after the situation was explained to her, promised a substantial meal in twenty minutes. She was a lean, pale-faced woman, and her body was bent with labour and the damp of the marshes. But there was a kindly smile on her worn face, and Laura felt that she would find all the sympathy of a good heart under the somewhat forbidding exterior.

After an excellent breakfast, during which the two lovers talked cheerfully on the most commonplace subjects, John Shil lit a cigarette, and, drawing out a tide-table, studied it thoughtfully.

"It will be no good my leaving here for two hours, Laurie," he said; "I can't possibly row up the creek to Black Hall till the tide begins to flow. Shall we have a walk round the island?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice. "I should like it. The loneliness of this place fascinates me."

It was an ordinary reply to an ordinary question, but her voice trembled. For she knew that the brief period of quiet friendship was over, and that the hour had come in which she was to pit the strength of her love against the honour of the man who loved her.

"This is wonderful," said Laura, as they walked along the high bank which surrounded the island. "I have never seen anything like it before."

"It seems strange after Laverstone and the Stonewold Hills," he replied, "but one gets used to it in these parts. At first the flatness and desolation depressed me, but now I am inclined to think that it has a charm of its own."

"Yet it must be dreadful to live here always," she said. "Poor Mrs Dowsett! no wonder she looks so white and ugly and old. Yet the man looks well enough."

"Ah, that is the unfairness of life in the Essex flats," he replied. "The men go about their work on the water, and fine healthy work it is, too. This chap works on the oyster beds farther up the creek, and he is a sort of watchman of the oyster fisheries. But the women spend all their time on the land, and

you can see the mark of the soil in their faces. Ague, malaria, rheumatism, these are the devils of the marshes, and it is the women who writhe in their clutches. Yet they bear it all patiently for their husbands' sakes."

Laura was silent, and looked out across the lonely land to the still more lonely sea. Her life had been full of great tragedies, of events which had seared both heart and brain. Yet she wondered as she looked at the wide bank of glistening mud, and the brown sluicing tide, and the dull stillness which seemed the keynote of the place, whether after all there was any tragedy to equal the monotony of existence in a land like this. She, at least, had lived; she had been moved by strong passions, and been scorched by living flame. But Mrs Dowsett could never have known anything but the dreariness of life.

"Poor souls," she said, after a long pause, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, they are quite content," Shil replied, "and they have what some of us would give much to possess—a contented mind and a quiet sense of duty. They make no fuss about it, and, if anyone were to suggest that they were heroic, they would laugh. They have their own ideas of heroism. Many of their husbands and their brothers are heroes in their eyes—men who have saved life at sea, and who have been through hardships which are never recounted in the daily papers. They do not realise that the men are alive, and they are little better than dead."

"Save that they do their duty," Laura replied slowly, "and surely that is the highest life of all."

She did not look at him as she spoke; but he knew from the tone of her voice that she was not thinking of Mrs Dowsett. Her eyes were fixed on the distant sea, as though she were looking for the return of some ship—some golden argosy that would bring back happiness into her life.

"Shall we sit down?" said John Shil gently, "the timbers of that wreck seem dry enough."

They had come to a sharp turn in the bank. A narrow creek flowed inland for nearly half a mile, and the bank, following the line of the water, ran obediently along the whole length of it and returned on the other side. The creek was not more than fifty yards wide at the mouth, but it was necessary to make a detour of half a mile to skirt it. Half-way down the bank, on the side which faced the water, was the

battered frame of an old barge—a mere skeleton of a thing that had perhaps once been the pride of its owner and crew. John Shil moved towards it down the steep slope, and held out his hand to Laura.

She took the proffered assistance, and the firm grasp of the man's fingers sent the colour to her cheeks. He was only offering an ordinary courtesy, but her heart, beating fast at his mere touch, imagined the grip of possession, the strong hold of a hand that would take her, and protect her against the violence of the world.

They sat down on the edge of a plank which still stretched between two gaunt ribs. It was not a comfortable seat, but it was better than the damp grass. The old hulk was at the foot of the bank, and half of it was buried in the mud of the creek. Beneath their feet lay a mass of corks, sticks, seaweed, crab shells, and all the jetsam which the tide brings up with it from the sea.

For a little while neither of them spoke. There was much to be said, many questions to be asked and answered. Yet neither liked to break the silence. Their hands were side by side on the edge of the plank, but their fingers did not touch. Once again Laura's mind harked back to those happy days on the Stonewold Hills.

Then the memory of them stung her to madness, and she plunged headlong into the contest.

"So you are going to marry Leonore?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes," he replied steadily, "I am going to marry Leonore."

"I hope you will be happy," she continued. "How long has this been arranged?"

"About two months."

"Really?" she asked in some surprise. "I only saw it two days ago in the paper. But two months ago—why, Leonore was then the wife of another man."

"The wife of another man?" he repeated slowly. "My dear Laura, what on earth are you talking about? Miss Jackson has never been married." Then he looked sharply in her face, and caught hold of her arm. "What do you mean?" he asked sternly.

"I mean that two months ago Leonore was married to a man, and had been married to him for years. She has recently divorced him in America."

"In America? Ah, yes; she has just been to America."

Laura sprang off her seat and faced him with clenched hands and blazing eyes. His tone of indifference had stirred up all her hatred of Leonore.

"Do you want to know the name of the man?" she cried.

"Yes, yes, Laura, if you like to tell me," he replied. He spoke soothingly, as if to a fractious child. He thought that she had taken leave of her senses.

"Well, I will tell you," she said, making an effort to speak calmly. "Two months ago Leonore was the wife of Sir William Tankerlane."

The news might well have staggered the intellect of a strong-minded man. But John Shil merely frowned, and his eyes were full of pity, as he looked at Laura's white face. He was now firmly convinced that the death of her child had affected her brain.

"Laurie," he said gently, "my dear Laurie. What do you mean? Why, you are the wife of Sir William Tankerlane."

"I am now," she replied, "but two months ago I was—well, you can guess what I was." She tried to speak calmly, but her whole body trembled with excitement. She knew that she must speak calmly to convince him, and yet the knowledge that he believed her to be mad nearly drove her out of her senses.

"Laurie," the man cried pitifully, "my dearest Laurie. Let us talk of something else. We will talk of this another day, when you have had a rest. Let us walk back to the house now, or go on round the island."

She looked at him for a moment in horror, and then, as she realised the full meaning of his words, she lost all control of herself.

"Do you think me mad?" she cried. "I am as sane as you," but the look on her face and the fierce light in her eyes were almost a contradiction to her words. John Shil might well be forgiven for thinking that she had taken leave of her senses.

"Mad?" he said quietly. "No, of course not, Laurie. How absurd you are! But I'd rather hear your story another day, say to-morrow. I really ought to be getting off now. I will come to-morrow, Laurie, and we'll have a long talk together."

"Don't you believe what I say?" she cried. "I swear to

you that two months ago Leonore was the wife of Sir William Tankerlane, and that I—oh God, that I should have to plead and swear like this in order to be believed by you—by you, Jack, for whom I sacrificed my whole life, for whom I sold myself, for whom I have gone down into the very depths of hell.”

“Laurie,” he cried tenderly, as he took her in his arms. “Oh Laurie, my dearest.”

His agony was pitiful to witness, for he believed that suffering had driven her mad, and her talk of sacrifice conveyed nothing to his mind. He only wished to soothe her, to comfort her, and persuade her to return to Dowsett’s house. His heart ached for her, and yet he did not know how to reply to her ravings without offence. He merely held her in his arms, in the hope that she would realise how much he longed to help her and protect her from herself.

But the agony of the woman was more terrible than his own. All that she had suffered, all the misery of her life, all the grief for the loss of her child, all the fury at the treachery of Leonore, all the bodily pain and exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours had culminated in this one moment, when the man, to whom she had looked for love and sympathy, had insulted her with such kindness as one offers to a lunatic or a drunkard. With a cry of anguish she tore herself from his grasp, struck wildly at his face with her clenched hands, and then, falling to the ground, she laughed and sobbed like a maniac.

And then, as she lay huddled in a heap, with loosened hair and closed eyes, and hands that were thrust into the mud, wild, incoherent words broke from her lips. She babbled of Ben Holland, of the quarry in the Round Plantation, of William Tankerlane, of Leonore, of Paris, of her dead child, of her father, of the grinding poverty of Widley Street. Her brain was trying to piece together the story of her life. In her darkness she was trying to grope for the light. She imagined that she was telling John Shil all that she wished him to know, and that he would understand how she had sacrificed herself for him, and how she had suffered, and how she had come back to him to give him all her love.

But John Shil, as he listened to her disconnected ravings, did not understand. In fact he hardly heard the words, and certainly did not try to make sense of them. All his thoughts were occupied with the terrible and embarrassing position in

which he found himself, and he was more concerned about Laura's present condition than about anything else she might have to tell him.

He knelt down by her side and tried to comfort her; but she shrank and shuddered at his touch, and the torrent of words still came from her lips—broken, incoherent words interspersed with fits of weeping and laughter.

Then at last the words grew fainter, and the sobbing less violent, and at last both died away into silence.

"Laurie," said John Shil tenderly, laying his hand on her shoulder. She did not move or answer him. "Laurie," he repeated, "let me carry you back to the cottage."

She made no reply, and he shook her gently.

"Laurie," he cried piteously, "my dearest."

Then he picked her up from the ground and looked at her face. Her eyes were closed and her skin was white as paper. She lay limp and helpless in his arms. He laid her down again on the grass, and, running quickly to a small pool, filled his cap with muddy water and dashed the dirty liquid in her face. He did this again and again, but she did not open her eyes. He placed his hand against her heart; it fluttered feebly and irregularly.

"Oh God!" he cried aloud in his anguish, "if she should die." And for the moment the awful thought came to him that God had intervened in this manner to save them both from sin. "Give her back to me," he cried again, "and I will not take her till she is free."

And then, as if in answer to his prayer, Laura opened her eyes and looked at him. But there was no recognition in her look. She stared past him at the sky.

"Laurie," he said softly, "my dearest Laurie, I will take you back now to the cottage. You want rest, dear. Will you let me carry you?"

She did not answer him, but still gazed at the sky.

Then a great fear seized him, and, stooping down, he picked her up in his arms and climbed the bank to the path. She did not resist, but a few incoherent words came from her lips, and she stared vacantly at sea and sky and marshland.

When he reached the cottage with his burden he encountered Mrs Dowsett.

"Lord help us!" she cried with a look of fear on her white, dull face. "What be it, sir; what be it?"

"Miss Vane has been taken ill," he replied. "She has fainted. I'm afraid it is serious. I'm going to place her in your hands, and you must nurse her. I'll pay you well for your trouble—two hundred pounds if you will look after her and keep your mouth shut."

"Take her upstairs, sir," the woman answered grimly, "and don't talk of money now. Poor thing, poor thing. I mistrusted the look in her eyes."

John Shil carried his burden up to the clean, plainly furnished room, and laid it on the bed. Mrs Dowsett followed, carrying a small bottle of some greenish-white liquid.

"Where is your nearest doctor?" he asked sharply.

"Gorehaven, sir."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"'Bout two hours in a boat."

"Can't you get there by land?"

"No, sir; leastways, not in that time."

"Well, your husband must take me round at once in his oyster smack and I'll bring a doctor back with me."

"He's down the creek, sir."

"Well," said John Shil, "I'll row down and fetch him. Do all you can."

"I've a drop of medicine here, sir," she replied, holding out the bottle. "'Tis powerful good stuff for fever."

"Fever?" exclaimed John Shil. "Miss Vane hasn't got fever."

"Ay, sir," the woman replied with a look of wisdom. "All our ills come from fever. 'Tis fever she has, poor soul, and it's reached her brain."

"What is the stuff?" he asked. "Did a doctor make it up?"

"Doctor?" the woman replied with a harsh laugh. "No, sir, doctors ain't for us on Conasea, save in childbirth, or death, or such like. We brew the stuff ourselves, as our folk have done since time began. Made of marsh herbs it is, sir—good, honest stuff. This be the home of the fever, and Nature allers grows remedy close to hand."

"Well, I daresay it won't hurt her," he replied impatiently. "Do all you can, and I'll do all I can for you in return. I am going now to find Dowsett."

He gave a last glance at Laura, who still lay motionless on the bed with wide-open eyes, and then left the room. He could do no more than fetch a doctor, and yet, perhaps, Laura would

be beyond the reach of all medical aid before he returned. The man had suffered much during the last two years, but never had he suffered so terribly as this.

He launched the punt, set the sail, and tore down the creek with wind and tide in his favour. In less than ten minutes he had hailed the *William and Sarah*, and, as the smack hove to, he ran his little craft alongside, and jumped aboard with the painter in his hand.

"I want you to take me to Gorehaven at once," he exclaimed. "I want a doctor. Miss Vane is very ill."

"Pull in the dredge," said Dowsett to the man who constituted the crew of the smack. That was all he said. He did not mention terms. He knew well enough that the reward would be worth more than his loss of time.

"I'll tow the punt ashore with the dinghy," said Shil, "and drop her anchor. She'll be all right, I suppose."

"She'll be all right, sir. We'll pick her up on the way back."

In a few minutes John Shil was back on the *William and Sarah*, and the smack was rushing down the creek towards the sea. Yet to John Shil she seemed to crawl along like a fat snail.

"It's a matter of life and death," he said, as he stood by Dowsett at the tiller.

"Take the tiller a minute, sir, will you?" the sailor replied. "I and my mate'll rig up a spinnaker, though we ain't a yacht."

The two sailors got the big balloon jib out of the foc's'le and rigged it up on a spar. John Shil at the tiller set his teeth and kept his eyes on the fluttering red pennant, as the freshening wind drove them through a wall of white foam and green water. He was not much of a sailor, and knew that if he gybed the boat he might carry everything out of her, and not reach Gorehaven till nightfall.

Then Dowsett came aft, and relieved him at the post.

"We'll be there in hour'n half," said the sailor, "but it'll be a long beat back."

John Shil did not answer. He was looking over the stern at the seething wall of white foam, and the dull yellow water beyond, and again beyond that at the tiny black roof of a cottage. And, as he looked, he prayed.

CHAPTER XXVI

TANKERLANE SHOWS HIS TEETH

THE *William and Sarah* reached Gorehaven Harbour in an hour and twenty minutes, and John Shil was put ashore directly she dropped anchor.

He made his way to the nearest doctor, and explained matters to him.

"I know you must be busy," he said, after he had answered the doctor's brief questions, "but you can ask what fee you like for this case. And if you pull it through all right—well, you can have anything it is in my power to give. But I must ask one thing of you, doctor, and that is secrecy. I don't wish this lady's name——"

"I am not in the habit of discussing my patients," the doctor replied stiffly.

"No, of course not," said John Shil, "but this is a peculiar case. I will be perfectly frank with you. This lady is a married woman, and if her husband finds her, all the doctors in the world won't save her. She has run away from him."

"I understand," the doctor replied, with a grim smile, "but I am not concerned with my patients' histories, except where they bear on the case. Well, I can start in five minutes."

"Is there no other way of getting to the place?" Shil asked. "It'll be a dead beat all the way back—four hours of it, so Dowsett says."

"Oh yes," replied the doctor, "I've got a little motor-launch, and we'll run down in that. A good deal of my practice lies up the creeks in places one can't get to by road, and I've found the launch invaluable. We'll get there in an hour and ten minutes."

"Good man," cried Shil joyfully, "you deserve to have a fine practice."

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"You'd better get on down to the wharf," said the doctor. "I've got a few things to get together, and you can be telling Dowsett what you're going to do. It'll save time."

John Shil left the house, found Dowsett, and explained matters to him. Then Dr Hardy appeared with a bag, and a few minutes later the two men were spinning out of the harbour into the teeth of the wind.

The doctor, a fine, sunburnt young fellow of about thirty, was an interesting companion, and he chatted incessantly, as though anxious to divert Shil's thoughts from the object of their journey. He had lived in the district for five years, and had much to tell about the marsh folk, about their dislike of doctors, about the Peculiar People, who looked on medicine as the food of the devil, about the storms he had encountered in order to reach a sick bed, about the sailor folk who came and went continually, and whom he often visited on their ships. And then he spoke of the loneliness of the marshland, and how it had entered into the souls of the inhabitants, and how he himself had felt the spell of it in some silent creek at night time. But he ended by declaring that he would not exchange his life for the finest practice in the West End.

And so the journey passed quickly and pleasantly enough, but as the roof of Dowsett's cottage came in view the doctor ceased talking. He knew that nothing would now distract the thoughts of his companion, and that conversation might only irritate him.

They anchored a few yards away from the "hard" and went ashore in the little dinghy. Dr Hardy took his bag and went straight upstairs to Laura's room. John Shil stayed in the parlour by himself. Mrs Dowsett had met them at the door with the news that there was no change in the patient's condition, and the man consoled himself with the thought that he had this at least to be thankful for.

When twenty minutes had passed, the doctor came downstairs with a grave face, and, closing the door behind him, came over to Shil and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Brain fever," he said calmly. "There is no need to be alarmed, but at the same time I may as well tell you that it is a serious case. I don't believe in doctors telling lies to relatives and friends. She must have perfect rest and quiet and constant attention. I'm going to stay here to-night. Mrs Dowsett will sleep in the patient's room, and Dowsett on the

smack. If I get time for any sleep there'll be a bed for me."

John Shil held out his hand and said nothing. It was a simple way of expressing his thanks.

"Would you like to stay here?" continued the doctor, "or will you return to Black Hall?"

"I must return," Shil replied in a low voice. "I cannot explain everything to you, doctor, but I can tell you that this lady's husband will look for her at Black Hall, and that, if I am absent—well, you can understand what he will think."

"I understand," the doctor replied with a slight frown. He was a clean-living man, and he had a poor opinion of men who took wives away from their husbands.

"You misunderstand me," Shil continued, "if you think that I am engaged in a common intrigue; that I am mixed up in a vulgar scandal. This lady is as good and sweet as my own mother. But she loathes her husband. I cannot explain the facts to you, nor can I explain why I, for certain other reasons, am bound to protect her from her husband's violence." He spoke earnestly, and looked the doctor full in the face as he spoke.

"I believe you," Dr Hardy replied simply.

"If you require any further proof of my intentions," Shil continued, "I will tell you that I am shortly to be married to another woman, and that I have always passed as an honourable man."

Dr Hardy held out his hand.

"These matters do not concern me," he replied, "but I like to deal with straight people. Go home, Mr Shil, and we'll do all we can. You can do no good here. Come down to-morrow on the first ebb, and I hope I shall have good news for you."

"May I see her before I go?" asked Shil. "I should like to, if I may, in case——" He paused; he was afraid to put his fears into words.

He followed the doctor upstairs, and when the latter had opened the door, he entered, and, crossing over to the bedside, looked earnestly at Laura's face. It was scarcely visible in the darkened room, but he could see that the eyes were closed. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and left the room.

A few minutes later he was sailing down the creek, but when he had crossed the broad estuary, he lowered the sail,

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and bent to his oars with furious energy. With the help of the flood tide he reached the quay by the park in an hour and a half, and walked up to the house with his gun under his arm, and Pat meekly trotting at his heel.

After a cold bath and a shave and a change of clothes, he felt refreshed in body and mind, and did full justice to a cold luncheon which was awaiting him in the dining-room. It was half-past four in the afternoon, and he had not tasted food since his breakfast on Conasea Island.

When he had finished his meal, he retired to the smoking room, and lit a pipe. He was tired, but more easy in his mind than he had been for hours. Under the soothing influence of good food and wine and tobacco, things appeared in a more rosy light. Laura had a fine constitution, and was in good hands. Undoubtedly she would pull through this illness. All she wanted was rest and quiet and skilful nursing. Such influence has a man's bodily comfort on his mind. After all, hope and despair are largely a matter of physical content or hardship.

Yet, even in this mood of optimism, John Shil could not hide from himself the serious nature of the problem that would confront him in the near future. He had assumed Laura's recovery to health. But after that? marriage to Leonore? For the moment he could not contemplate such an event with equanimity. Leonore had concealed important news from him, news that must inevitably affect their relations towards each other. He could not doubt that she had done this with a definite purpose in her mind. She knew well enough why he had given up all hope of taking Laura from her husband. She was well aware that only the existence of the child restrained him from sin. She herself had harped on this one point in Widley Street. "The child, the child." That had been her cry; that had been the weapon with which she had conquered him.

And now the child was dead, and there was nothing save a sense of honour to restrain him from taking the step which would lead him to happiness.

"Only my sense of honour," he said to himself, as he watched the blue smoke from his pipe curl up to the ceiling; "yet that is enough for an honourable man."

But, as he considered the matter from every point of view, he began to wonder if, after all, honour would prove a strong

enough chain to bind him to Leonore. It was not purely a question of self. There was Laura to be considered. She had left her husband and come to him for protection. No words of love had passed between them, but he knew well enough why she had come to him. She had evidently decided to break loose from all the ties which bound her to Sir William Tankerlane, and to seek the happiness that had so long been denied to her. She had not spoken of love, but he had seen the passion in her eyes, and the mere fact of her presence at Black Hall was more eloquent than a thousand protestations of affection.

The unfortunate man was in a position in which no honourable man ever desires to find himself. It was not even the simple but cruel battle between self and honour. He thrust all idea of self out of his head, but even then, the matter resolved itself into an exquisite problem. On the one hand he had to behave honourably to Leonore; on the other, he had to do the best he could for the woman who loved him and who had placed herself in his hands.

And, as he pondered over the matter, he began to recall Laura's words—the last words she had uttered before her brain had lapsed into hopeless darkness. They had sounded like the ravings of a maniac, but, supposing that they contained even a germ of truth. Supposing that Leonore—oh no, it was impossible, it was ridiculous.

His reverie was interrupted by the entrance of a footman, who handed him a card on a salver. The card bore the name of Sir William Tankerlane.

"I will see him," said John Shil curtly. "Show him up here."

The man left the room, and, when he had gone, Shil rose to his feet, and, walking over to the fireplace, stood with his back to the grate. For some reason or other, this position seems to give a man confidence, and he feels master of the room and all that is in it.

"I shall have to lie," he said to himself. "For her sake. I am glad that it is getting dark."

In a few moments Sir William Tankerlane entered the room, and held out his hand.

"Glad to see you, Shil," he said heartily. "It's a long time since we met."

John Shil bowed gravely, but made no attempt to take the proffered hand.



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"Oh, it's like that, is it?" said Sir William, laying his hat and stick on a table. "Well, I s'pose I can't expect you to be friendly after all that's happened. But girls will change their minds, you know. And I thought, as you'd arranged to marry Miss Jackson, the actress, that the old wounds were healing up a bit. May I sit down?"

"Certainly," replied Shil in a cold voice. "You will find that chair a very comfortable one," and he pointed to a seat where Tankerlane would have the full blaze of the firelight on his face. Sir William Tankerlane ensconced himself in the chair, and crossed his legs.

"Fine place this you've got, Shil," he said, as he looked round the room. "A bit forbidding outside, but a change from the old days, eh? A lot of water has flowed under London Bridge since then."

"And doubtless it will continue to flow," Shil replied. "Can I offer you anything to smoke?" and he held out his cigar-case.

"Thank you," said Tankerlane, as he took a cigar. "Yes, you've certainly made a lot of the place. I remember it when old Black-Hinton had it. I was a boy then, and it always seemed to me like a prison."

"I presume you haven't come here to pay a social call," said Shil drily. "May I ask what has brought you all the way from Gloucestershire to Essex?"

"Business," replied Tankerlane curtly, "business with you, Mr Shil." All his geniality had vanished, as though he had received an insult. His voice was hard, and the lines on his harsh, handsome face had deepened.

"What can I do for you?" Shil asked.

"Well, in the first place, you might turn on the lights. It's rather dark."

"I'm sorry you don't like it," said Shil, "but we never turn on the lights till six o'clock."

"You doubtless have good reasons for keeping in the dark," retorted Sir William rudely. "You made a slip there, my friend. You don't wish me to see your face. I have learned one of the things I came here to find out."

"I am glad of that," Shil replied, "for I must ask you to leave before I kick you out." The thin veil of politeness that had hung between the two men had been torn aside, and they faced each other with all the primeval passions of savages. It

was now merely a question as to which of the two had the more cunning or the greater bodily strength. Sir William Tankerlane rose to his feet and squared his shoulders. He was a fine broad-shouldered man, but he looked slight and weak beside Shil's huge body. He laughed, and walked towards the table where he had placed his hat and stick. He had no intention of leaving, but he wished to be farther away from John Shil.

When he reached the table, he placed his hand on the wall and switched on the electric light. There he turned suddenly and looked his enemy in the face.

"I have come here to find my wife," he said abruptly. "Where is she?"

"You've got some pluck," answered Shil with a grim smile. "To come into a man's house and ask him for your own wife indicates courage, but not prudence, Sir William."

Tankerlane's face darkened with fury, and he stepped forward with clenched hands, as though he were going to strike Shil in the face. Then he paused, and subdued the brute instinct to decide the contest in so primitive and hopeless a fashion.

"You scoundrel," he cried, "do you think I've come here to get the truth out of you by physical violence—no, stay where you are, you blackguard."

John Shil had sprung forward with a white face and blazing eyes, and with no thought in his mind save that of choking the life out of the man who had insulted him. But Tankerlane had taken a revolver out of his pocket, and the expression on his face meant murder.

"You blackguard!" he continued, as John Shil paused and looked at the ugly little weapon. "Did you think I was fool enough to come on this errand without some weapon that might place us on terms of equality? You have taken my wife from me. You needn't deny it, for she told me with her own lips that she was coming to you. Where is she?"

"She is not here," Shil replied calmly, "but she is where you will never find her. She is ill, perhaps she is dead. I do not know, for when I last saw her she was between life and death."

"Between life and death," whispered Tankerlane hoarsely. "Oh God, no! You lie, man, you lie. It's a dirty trick to make a weak fool of me."

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"It's no trick," replied Shil solemnly. "'Tis God's truth. She may live, but if you go to her she will die."

"No, no," cried Tankerlane, "I must see her. Take me to her. See here, I am unarmed," and he placed his revolver on the table. "I do not use force. Laura is my wife, and I love her. Take me to her now, for pity's sake."

"I will not," John Shil replied firmly.

Tankerlane looked at him for a moment in horror, and then his fear and anguish gave place to fury.

"You will not?" he said slowly. "Then, by God, I will make you. Do you know that I saw Ben Holland die?"

John Shil stood motionless, and his face was calm in comparison with Tankerlane's distorted features. For one brief moment he wondered whether he could silence the man by breaking his neck. But Tankerlane, repenting of his generosity, had already resumed possession of the revolver.

"Do you hear me?" Tankerlane repeated with a foul oath. "Do you realise what I mean when I say that I can make you tell me where Laura is?"

"So you are the other man," Shil replied quietly. "I see. I am obliged to you for your information. It explains a good deal I could not understand. I'm afraid, Tankerlane, that you have fallen in my estimation. I never thought very much of you, but I didn't think you were such a hound as you make yourself out to be."

"Shut your mouth, damn you!" cried Tankerlane, "and make up your mind what you're going to do."

"So you forced Laura to marry you," continued Shil coldly. "You persuaded her to do so by threatening to tell all you knew about Ben Holland's death. I am glad to know this, very glad to know that she has always been true to me, and more faithful in her sacrifice than if she had married me. I am glad to know this, and yet, when I think of what she has suffered—by Heaven, Tankerlane, if you ever come into my hands——"

"That'll do," interrupted Tankerlane. "You are in my hands now. I will give you five minutes to decide. At the end of that time, I shall either go to Laura, or else to the police."

"Well, we will spend the five minutes in pleasant conversation," Shil replied. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you. Do I understand that you refuse to tell me where Laura is?"

"I will decide at the end of the five minutes you have graciously allowed me," Shil answered. "In the meantime, I would like to point one or two things out to you. In the first place, Leonore told me that she had bound you by a solemn oath never to speak of what you saw in the Round Plantation. I don't know what you received in exchange for this valuable promise, but I've no doubt she paid heavily for it."

"It cost her nothing," Tankerlane said with a smile, "and my promise—well, that cost me nothing either. Under ordinary circumstances, I should have kept it. But when a man's wife is dying, and he is kept from her side—come, Shil, don't be a fool, I am not asking more than one man should ask of another. She is my wife, and I love her dearly. I am ready to sacrifice my honour for the sight of her."

"I am aware of that," Shil answered quietly, "and it is quite clear that your oaths and promises are of no value. Therefore what inducement have I to pay you anything for them?"

"Oh, I will swear to you by all I hold most sacred——"

"Thank you," Shil interrupted curtly, "you have doubtless done that already to Leonore, and yet you are quite prepared to break your oath. But there is another thing I should like to point out to you, Tankerlane, and it is more likely to appeal to you than any talk about honour. Supposing you do tell the police about what you saw in the wood. How will you explain your two years' silence? How will you give them a good reason for not interfering at the time? Do you think your evidence will be of any value?"

"I will risk that," Tankerlane replied. "Laura and Miss Jackson have both paid me to be silent. All that will count in my favour. And there is Henry Blurton."

"He will not speak."

"No, but I shall prove that he has been paid to be silent."

"And you are prepared to go into court and lay the whole story before the public?"

"I shall certainly do so."

"Well, I'm sorry for you," Shil replied. "I shouldn't wonder if the public don't try to lynch you, and it's quite certain that you'll have to leave the country, for no decent man or woman will ever speak to you again."

"I'll take my chance of that," Tankerlane said grimly. "Well, the five minutes are up, Shil, and I want to know what you're going to do."

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"I made up my mind some time ago," Shil replied, "but I wished to have a little chat with you. I absolutely refuse to tell you where your wife is."

"Think what you are doing," cried Tankerlane, "think of the consequences."

"I am not afraid of you," Shil answered quietly. "I don't think you can do anything. But even if I were afraid of you, and even if I were absolutely at your mercy, I should answer you just the same. The least I can do for the woman, who sacrificed her whole life for me, is to make some sacrifice in return. The sight of you would kill her, and I have made up my mind that she shall not see you."

"I implore you," cried Tankerlane, "for Heaven's sake let me see her. I do not threaten; I ask pity of you. If she should die—oh, if she should die!"

The man's face was distorted with agony, and looked hideous in the full glare of the electric light. It was easy to see that he loved his wife with all his heart and soul. But John Shil had no pity for him.

"Your entreaties are as useless as your threats, Tankerlane," he replied coldly. "I am sorry for you, but you have brought this on yourself. My own duty is clear, and I shall do it."

Tankerlane glared at him for a moment in horror, and then fury swept all other emotions from his heart.

"You fool," he said in a harsh voice. "Do you think I cannot find out where Laura is hiding herself. I have only to keep an eye on you. If she is dying, you will go to see her. And I shall go to see her too. And when I have found her—well, then I will let you see whether I am afraid to tell all that I know about you."

"You can do what you like," Shil replied quietly. "But I shall make it my business to see that you don't set eyes on her. You'd better leave now, Sir William, and, if you're found on any land belonging to me, you need not expect as much courtesy as I have shown you to-day."

Sir William Tankerlane looked at him for a moment in speechless fury, and John Shil rang the bell.

"I'd like to kill you!" Tankerlane blurted out, and he fingered the revolver in his pocket. Shil laughed.

"That wouldn't help you," he replied. "On the contrary, it would interfere with your plans. But don't drive a desperate man too far, Sir William. Remember that your own death

would be the best thing that could happen for Laura and myself."

The conversation was brought to a close by the entrance of a footman. Sir William Tankerlane took up his hat and stick and bowed.

"Good night, Mr Shil," he said quietly, "and many thanks for your invitation."

"Good night," Shil replied; "I hope you'll catch your train."

Sir William Tankerlane grinned, and left the room. When he had gone, Shil turned off the electric light, and threw himself into an armchair before the fire. There was much to be thought of before he dressed for dinner. He had to leave for Conasea Island early in the morning, and he had to get away without being followed by Tankerlane. He was glad to think that the latter would probably have to spend the night in the open air, as there was no inn within five miles of Black Hall. It would surely be easy enough to elude the man, even if he watched all night. It would be impossible for anyone to successfully patrol the whole park. But Shil intended to leave nothing to chance. He rang the bell, and when the footman answered the summons, he gave him careful instructions.

"Please tell the headkeeper, Martin," he said, "that I want him and two of the underkeepers to watch the house and grounds all night, and see that no one is hanging about. If by any chance they should come across the gentleman who has just left, they can either lock him up in the stable, or take him out of the park by the west gate. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied, with a solemn face, which gave no indication of his surprise, or of the enthusiasm with which he intended to retail the news in the servants' hall.

"Well, look sharp about it," said Shil, "and they'd better start the job at once. By the by, I shall be out all night myself. I'm going away to shoot duck, and it's possible that I may not be back to breakfast. See that a packet of sandwiches is made up for me, and that my large flask is filled with whisky and water."

The man left the room, and John Shil lit a cigarette and leant back in his chair. The interview he had just had with Tankerlane would provide material for many an hour of hard thinking. But for the moment only two thoughts occupied his mind. The first was how to get to Laura without Tanker-



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lane's knowledge, and the second was whether Laura herself was alive or dead.

He finally resolved to leave after dinner, and go down the creek on the last of the ebb tide. He would have the shelter of the darkness and the certain assistance of the wind, which still blew steadily from the west. He would also have an excuse for the journey, for he often spent a night in duck-shooting.

And lastly, he would have the gun, and, even if he came across no ducks, it was just possible that a gun might be very useful to him.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT THE GATES OF DEATH

DIRECTLY Shil had finished his dinner he changed his clothes and made preparations for spending a night on the water. He put on two heavy jerseys, and placed sandwiches and a flask in one of the pockets of a thick overcoat. In the other pocket he put two dozen cartridges.

Then, calling the dog, he left the house by a back entrance, and made his way through the park to the creek. Before he had gone fifty yards, he was hailed by one of the keepers.

"All right, Jocelyn," he said, as the man came up to him, "I'm going out to see if I can get a duck or two. Have you seen anyone about?"

"Not a soul, sir. We've a couple of dogs with us, and they ain't give no sign."

"Well, you can come down to the creek with me, and carry my gun and rug. It's warm walking in all these clothes."

"You'll need 'em, sir," replied the keeper, as he relieved his master of the thick rug and heavy gun, "'tis powerful cold in them marshes. But I doubt if you'll get any duck to-night. The air ain't crisp enough."

"There's a nice moon," Shil replied curtly.

"I'd go right down into the Darkwater, if I were you, sir, and lie up among them little islands on the far side. 'Tis a long way, but a grand place for the duck at this time of year."

"I think that's what I shall do, Jocelyn," Shil answered.

"Sam Dowsett'll give 'ee breakfast on Con'sea," the man continued, quite unconscious that his advice coincided with the plans his master had already made. "And like as not he'll be glad of company. 'Tis a mortal lonely place in winter. This be a queer spot, ain't it, sir?"

They had come to the Tidal Pool, and were walking along

the path by the edge of the wood. The moon, which had not yet risen far above the horizon, was almost hidden by the trees, but a dim light filtered through the leafless branches, and showed the outline of the wall, faint and ghostly, like a fairy ring. The water, ebbing out through the narrow culvert, gurgled noisily, and the faint sigh of the wind in the trees was not loud enough to drown the sound of it.

"You're right, Jocelyn," Shil replied; "I'm thinking of filling it up, or else cleaning it out. What's the matter with the dog?"

Pat had stopped, with his head laid close to the ground, and his eyes fixed on the trees. Both men looked in the same direction, but they could see nothing in the darkness which shrouded the lower part of the wood.

"What is it, Pat?" cried Shil. "Good dog, what is it?"

But the dog did not move. He might have been chiselled out of red bronze.

"'Tis a bird or beast, mebbe," said the keeper. But John Shil held out his hand and kept his eyes fixed on the trees.

"Give me the gun," he said quietly. The keeper held out the heavy 8-bore. Shil took it from his hand, and slipped two cartridges into the breech.

"Is there anyone there?" he cried, as he placed the gun to his shoulder. There was no reply but the sigh of the wind and the gurgle of the water.

"If there is anyone there," he continued in a loud, clear voice, "he'd better speak, for I'm going to fire a couple of shots into the trees."

There was still no answer, and the next moment two loud shots rang out in quick succession. But still the dog did not move.

Then John Shil and the keeper made their way across the grass to the trees, and searched in the undergrowth. There was nothing to be heard, and nothing to be seen by the light of the small lantern which the keeper carried. A few shattered twigs, a few shot marks on the bark of the trees represented the net result of the fusillade. Yet John Shil was not sorry that he had fired. He knew that if there had been anyone close to the edge of the trees, the man would have overheard the previous conversation, and would have known that he was going to Conasea Island.

"'Twas nowt," said the keeper roughly, "but I don't know

what's come over the blamed dog. Look at him a-standing there for all the world as if he were a mummy."

John Shil looked, and saw that Pat had not stirred. He was still in the same position and his eyes were still fixed on the trees.

"Pat," he cried, "here—come here, Pat."

But the dog did not move. He did not even look at his master, but, as Shil advanced towards him, he suddenly threw up his head in the air, and howled dismally.

"What is it, Pat?" Shil asked in an encouraging voice. "What is it, old fellow?"

But Pat continued to howl, and was apparently in a state of abject terror. The hair on his back was ruffled, and the tail was tucked between his legs. Shil stooped down and patted him on the head.

"Bayin' at the moon, mebbe," said the keeper, "though I ain't ever seen a dog look so skeart when he was a-bayin'."

"He's an old fool," exclaimed Shil angrily. "There must be something about. Just have another look, Jocelyn. Take a turn round and search the wood."

For ten minutes the keeper searched, and the light of his lantern flashed across the grass and through the trees, and even into the depths of the pool itself. He found no trace of anyone; but the dog continued to howl at intervals, and show unmistakable signs of fear. Shil had not slept for thirty-six hours, and his nerves were strung to a high pitch by a day of toil and anxiety. The noise of the howling irritated him, and he began to feel afraid of some indefinable danger.

"Stop that row," he cried harshly, and, walking up to the dog, he struck the animal across the head with his open hand.

Pat yelped, and lay down on the ground, as though asking for forgiveness. But his master paid no attention to him.

"Come along, Jocelyn," he said curtly. "I'm missing the last of the ebb tide." He moved towards the trees, and the dog slunk along behind.

"I ain't ever seen him like that before," muttered the keeper. "But dogs is mighty sensible. Mebbe he see somethin' as we couldn't."

"A ghost perhaps," said Shil with a laugh, as they passed through the trees and reached a small wooden gate in the wall.

"Taint so unlikely, sir. There be a ghost about the place.

My father see him just afore mother died. He come out of the pool, so they say. He were drowned three hundreds of years ago—one of the old Hintons he was.”

Shil opened the gate and laughed. He had more to fear from the living than the dead.

“He don’t show hisself often,” the man said, as they walked across the grass to the little quay, “and I don’t hev much faith in him. ’Tis more likely the dog used his own nat’rel instinct and howled cos he knew summut was about to happen. They do howl like that just afore a death.”

John Shil made no reply, but this time he did not laugh.

He stepped into the punt, and arranged the rug as a cushion for the dog. Pat crept quietly on to it, and curled himself up without so much as a wag of his tail. He had recovered from his temporary insanity, but he was obviously unhappy and ashamed of himself. Shil then took the gun and wrapped it up in his overcoat.

“Mind you keep a watch all night, Jocelyn,” he said, “and I’d like one of you to stay down by the creek. You can all have a day in bed to-morrow.”

“We’ll keep our eyes open, sir,” the man replied, as Shil pushed off the punt from the quay. “And, if I were you, sir, I’d make straight for them islands t’other side of creek, and breakfast at Conasea. Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Jocelyn,” Shil answered.

The man touched his cap, and turned away towards the wood. Then Shil hoisted the sail, and, going aft, sat down on the rug by the side of the dog. He had little to do but keep the boat in the middle of the stream. The wind was blowing gently but steadily from the west, and the moon shone brightly in a clear sky.

Never had John Shil felt the loneliness of the marshland more completely than he did that night, as he slipped gently down the tide towards the sea. There was absolute silence, and a desolation which can only be found in desert places. On either side of him lay the water, silver in the moonlight, and beyond that two smooth, low, glistening slopes of mud, for the tide had already been ebbing for three hours, and the naked ugliness of the slime was laid bare.

It was not a cold night, but on a boat it is never warm after sunset, even in the summer, and Shil was glad of his thick jerseys and his heavy woollen gloves. He even glanced once

or twice at his overcoat, which was wrapped round the gun. But the cold of the damp, raw atmosphere was not so piercing as the chill which had gripped his heart. He could not get Jocelyn's words out of his head: "They do howl like that afore a death."

It was a mere superstition, common enough among the ignorant in every part of England. No man of intelligence or education believed in it. Yet it was older than Christianity, and was almost ingrained in human nature itself. From generation to generation, through countless years, in which dynasties and even religions had risen and fallen, men had believed that the howling of the dog, and his ancestor, the wolf, had presaged disaster and death. Enlightenment dispels these gloomy superstitions, but they return when the mind is plunged in darkness. They are hidden by civilisation, but they remain part of our inheritance from the past.

The boat moved steadily down the tide, and the breeze freshened as the moon rose in the sky. A dark bank of clouds had risen in the west, but John Shil's back was turned to them, and he did not notice these heralds of a storm. He sat grim and motionless, with the oar in his hand, and his eyes fixed on the water ahead of him. The dog lay close against his feet. He was apparently asleep, but his eyes, half covered by a bit of the rug, were wide open. His master had not spoken a word to him since they had been on the boat, and the faithful animal was waiting to detect some movement or hear some word that would indicate forgiveness.

Then suddenly Pat raised his head and listened. And John Shil, absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts, looked up into the sky and listened also. Faint and far overhead came a sound which one does not expect to hear at night, and which certainly ought not to proceed from the clouds. It resembled the yelping of a pack of hounds in full cry. But Shil knew that of course it was nothing of the sort. It was merely a flock of barnacle geese flying landwards from the North Sea.

The dog jumped to his feet, put his fore-paws on the edge of the punt, and barked vociferously. He doubtless wondered how any of his race had managed to get so far above the earth. His bark expressed canine interest and pleasure. His eyes were fixed on the sky, and possibly he thought that some friend would drop lightly out of it to welcome him.

Then suddenly his whole demeanour changed. His tail

dropped between his legs, and, throwing back his head, he gave vent to a long, melancholy howl.

"Shut up, you brute!" Shil exclaimed. The dog turned and slunk back to his rug. He felt that he had forfeited all further claim to his master's esteem.

Far overhead went the geese, and Shil fancied he could see them like a long triangular blur against the moonlit sky. He had only heard them once before, but he knew well enough that the marsh folk regarded them with no favour, and many a sturdy sailor would pause at his work and press his fingers into his ears to shut out the sound of their cries. Superstition had it that they were the hounds of the Archangel Gabriel, and that they were pursuing some soul but recently freed from its earthly prison-house.

It may well be imagined that this trifling incident did not tend to restore John Shil to a more cheerful frame of mind. But fortunately his glance at the sky had called his attention to something which at once occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. He had seen for the first time the dark bank of clouds which was swiftly rising up from the west, and he knew enough of the local weather to realise that he would have as much wind in the estuary as he could do with unless he could reach the shelter of the Conasea Creek before the storm broke.

The little boat hissed through the water as the wind freshened. There was a white curl of foam at her broad bows, and a white wake behind her stern, as she stirred up a wash that left a line of tiny breakers on the mud banks which lay on either side. From time to time John Shil looked back at the advancing bank of clouds.

At last he swept out into the broad stretch of the Darkwater, and, hauling in his sheet, he altered his course so as to fetch the mouth of the Conasea Creek on the far side.

The wind was now on his beam, and he began to realise its strength. The little boat, in spite of her small spread of canvas, began to heel over under some of the gusts. She was heavy, and stoutly built, but she was not meant for sea work, and had very little freeboard. More than once Shil had to let go of the sheet, as the water was dangerously near to the gunwale. He knew that he was going to get drenched to the skin, and that he would need all his nerve and strength to cross safely to the other side. A skilled sailor would have made

light of the task, but Shil had had very little to do with boats ; he knew well enough what to do in an emergency, if he had time to think about it. But that ready response of hand to brain, which is the reward of long practical experience, was entirely wanting. He realised that in a crisis he would probably do the wrong thing, and that he would have no opportunity of correcting his mistake. For the sea only gives one chance to those who do battle with its tricks and vagaries.

The moon was still shining brightly in the sky overhead, but the cloud bank was very near to it, and Shil saw that in less than five minutes he would have darkness to add to his difficulties. He could, at present, just see the opposite shore, which stood out like a black wall beyond the gleaming water. But when the clouds had covered the moon, he would need a mark to steer by. He looked ahead for some light on which he could keep the nose of the boat.

There was, however, no such light to be seen. Far away to the east, the Sunk Deep Lightship flashed the red and white rays of its revolving lantern across ten miles of sea and sand. Several points west of this course there was a faint glimmer from the window of a farmhouse. There were several other specks of light dotted about on the horizon, but these two were nearest to the course he wished to take. He noted their position, and calculated that if he kept the head of the boat mid-way between the two, he would about fetch the mouth of the Conasea Creek.

Scarcely had he made these observations, when the cloud bank blotted out the moon, and all the panorama of glittering water and shadowy land vanished from his sight. Then a few drops of rain were driven against his face, and, looking westward, he noticed that the light from the farmhouse had vanished. A few seconds later a sharp squall struck the boat, and he was obliged to slack the mainsheet, and leave the sail fluttering in the wind. And then the rain came down in torrents, and the wind drove up the spray from the water to meet it.

Then John Shil noticed that even the Sunk Deep Light had disappeared behind the curtain of rain, and that he had nothing left to steer by. He resolved to keep the boat's head as near to the wind as possible. He calculated that this would take him some way to the windward of the Conasea Creek, but the error would be on the right side. He could easily drop

down the shore. Whereas, if he happened to get below the creek, he would never be able to get back against the wind and tide, and would have to anchor in order to save himself from being blown out to sea.

John Shil was no coward, and though the situation might well have daunted a more experienced sailor, he stuck to his task in grim earnest. Directly the first violence of the squall had passed away he hauled in the sheet, and the little craft heeled over nearly to the gunwale. But, as she gathered way, she righted herself proudly, and sent the water up in shower after shower of foam.

"I must keep her at it," he said to himself. "I must keep her at it." And no man could have a better motto than that for sailing or any form of sport, or even for the more serious things in life. John Shil had to reach Dowsett's farm that night, and it could only be done by sailing the boat for all she was worth. He knew that it would be worse than useless to try to row the heavy punt against the wind and tide. His only chance of reaching his destination lay in the strength of the tiny sail and the wind which gave it the power of half a dozen men.

"I must keep her at it," he said to himself. "I must keep her at it." He had no time to think of his errand, of Sir William Tankerlane, of Laura herself, who perhaps was dead. He had forgotten the howling of the dog and the yelp of Gabriel's hounds. His whole mind was absorbed in one thing, and his whole physical strength was required to carry out the directions of his mind. He had to keep the punt afloat, and keep her moving, and fetch the Conasea Creek. It was a hard task, but he set his teeth and vowed he would accomplish it so long as the punt floated and rope and canvas held together. It was only half a gale, and the yachtsman in his ten-tonner would have laughed at it. But to a man in an open boat, who knew but little of seamanship, it was something to try nerve and strength to the utmost.

"I must keep her at it," he muttered, as a wave came pouring over the lee-side, and the dog whined and shivered against his knee. The sea was rising in the Darkwater, and though fortunately the tide was with the wind, the water was already far too rough for an open boat with a bare fourteen inches of freeboard. Even a light dinghy would have fared better, for she would have risen more easily on the waves. But the heavy-timbered punt rolled and wallowed like a log.

John Shil that night showed all the courage and endurance of a brave and strong man. But Fortune was against him, and the worst of her blows had yet to come.

The wind, which was already blowing half a gale from the west, began to increase in violence, and again and again Shil had to either slack the sheet or bring the boat's head right up into the wind. Every time he did this the boat naturally ceased her progress towards the shore, and went rushing seawards on the ebb tide.

Then, again, he had to stop to bale out the boat. He was shipping a lot of water, and even the rain added its little contribution to the lake that swished and sluiced over the floor boards. This was a long business, but it had to be done. Apart from the fact that the waterlogged boat could scarcely make any progress, there was danger of her being swamped altogether. And every time he stopped to bale out the water, the boat went another two hundred yards towards the sea.

But in spite of these unavoidable obstacles to his progress, and in spite of the fact that the boat, which had no centre board, and scarcely any keel, made terrible leeway under the pressure of wind and tide, John Shil would just have fetched the mouth of the Conasea Creek, but for one of those accidents which no man can foresee, and which even the most experienced sailor is unable to guard against. The wind, which for some hours had been blowing steadily from the west, suddenly shifted to the nor-west, and then to the north.

This change of wind was unnoticed by Shil, whose mind was fully occupied with the waves. The sail flapped, but it had done so fifty times that night, and he looked upon it merely as a result of his bad helmsmanship. In the complete darkness he could not see that the wind was heading him off, and he had neither light nor compass to tell him that when he put up the helm, he had altered his course.

An hour passed, and he began to wonder why he had not reached the other side of the estuary. He did not know that he was sailing only just north of east, and that he was heading almost straight for the open sea. He noticed, however, that the waves were steeper, and that his little craft rolled up and down them like a helpless log.

Then at last his courage and even his great physical strength began to fail him. The darkness, the blinding sheets of rain, the roar of the wind and waters, all combined to destroy his

nerve and confuse his brain. He began to think that here was the end of everything, and that he would never emerge from the gloom and turmoil of the storm. He did not pray for help; he merely prayed for light and a glimpse of land. Even death would be better than this blind groping for life. His limbs ached, and his mind seemed unable to grasp the details of the things he had to do. He realised that in a few more minutes he would have to acknowledge his defeat.

For the next quarter of an hour he steered mechanically, and more by good fortune than good judgment he kept the boat moving with a full sail. He had forgotten all about Laura Tankerlane, but, curiously enough, he remembered the howling of the dog, and the cries of Gabriel's hounds. He began to realise the meaning of these omens of death.

Then at last the thing he had prayed for came to pass. The rain squall ceased as suddenly as it had commenced, and a few minutes afterwards the moon shone out in a clear sky. And then the Sunk Deep Light flashed out on his port bow. He gazed at it in horror. When he had last seen the light, it had been well to starboard. He looked behind him, and saw the light from the farmhouse almost dead astern.

He at once realised what had happened, and put the boat round, an operation that was only performed by a continuous pulling of the oar. As he did so, a great sea broke over the little craft, and swept her from stem to stern. He started to bale, but before he had thrown more than a few quarts of water overboard another wave came curling and breaking at the bow. The punt was too full of water to rise to it, and it poured clean over her, washing the dog out of her like a piece of cork. John Shil was up to his knees in water, and he felt the timbers sinking under his feet.

The sudden disaster roused him from his mental and physical stupor. He peeled off his jerseys and threw them into the sea, but before he could take off his boots, the punt lurched over, the water came swirling up to his breast. And then sea and wind and darkness seemed to beat him down into the unfathomable depths, where the eyes are blind and the lips are dumb and the ears are deaf, and where even the mind itself can see nothing but the swift memory of past events.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BIG TIDE

"EH, poor soul, poor soul!" said Mrs Dowsett, as she stood by Laura's bedside, and gazed at the white face and the closed eyes. "'Tis a lot of trouble she's had, I'm thinking, and there's more to come."

"We mustn't think of that," Dr Hardy replied. "Our business is to get her well and strong again. The crisis is over. She will live. But it has been a hard battle for all of us."

"I don't grudge the little I've done, sir, but I doubt if she'll thank us when she comes to her senses and learns the truth."

"She will be thankful for her life," the doctor answered sternly. "We've all got to make the best of our misfortunes. After all, it is possible that Mr Shil has not been drowned. The wind and tide might have carried him out to sea; he might have been picked up, and the boat—perhaps she's fetched some harbour down the coast."

"God rest his soul," Mrs Dowsett said fervently. "He was a good man, though new to these parts. I know nothing 'bout this poor thing, and what call he had to be looking after her, but, if he loved her, I don't blame him. Mebbe he's but a friend, for they tell me he's goin' to marry an actress in London."

"Well, I must leave you now. I've other patients," interrupted Dr Hardy, "and remember that you must keep the news about Mr John Shil from her. If she asks after him, tell her that he called yesterday morning, and will call again in a week's time. Invent any excuse you like for his absence. Say he's got influenza, a chill, a broken arm—anything. But keep her mind easy. I don't doubt that he'll turn up in a day or two."

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"Dowsett says there ain't a chance. 'Tis the worst gale he remembers this thirty year. You'm not goin' back on the boat?"

"No, I'm going to run her up the creek, land at Playle's 'hard,' and walk to Gorehaven. Good night, Mrs Dowsett. I'll call again to-morrow evening. There is no danger. You'll find that she has returned to her senses, when she wakes. But be careful what you say to her."

Mrs Dowsett saw him to the door, and then returned to the kitchen, where her husband sat smoking before the fire.

Forty-eight hours had passed since John Shil left the farm. The morning after his departure, Dr Hardy had waited in vain for his return, and in the afternoon Dowsett had taken a message by land to Black Hall. He returned late at night with the news that Mr Shil had left at 9.30 the previous evening in the punt with the intention of sailing down to Conasea Island, and that nothing further had been heard of him.

A search had at once been instituted, but up to the present no trace had been found of the boat or its owner. Two hundred people, most of them tenants of the missing man, had explored the Black Hall creek from the quay to the point where it joined the Darkwater, and a thorough search had been made along the banks on either side of the Conasea Creek. But owing to the terrible storm which swept the estuary itself it had been almost impossible to investigate the deeper and more open waters. They had telegraphed to Gorehaven for the help of two fishing smacks, but both had been obliged to put back into harbour, one of them with the loss of a hand, who had been swept overboard.

The wind, which had been off shore when John Shil had started to cross the Darkwater, and had then shifted to the north, had continued its course round the compass, and, as it increased in violence, had finally settled down into the south-east. There was no shelter from its fury in the estuary, and the men who returned to Gorehaven, and who had encountered its full violence in the open sea, said that they could not remember such a gale from that quarter since the day the *Tullibardine* had been wrecked on the Black Deep Sands nearly thirty years ago.

But Dowsett, whose smack was, so to speak, in home waters,

and who had not been forced to face the fury of the open sea, had not hesitated to give all the assistance in his power. He had only returned from the search half an hour before Dr Hardy's departure. Since daybreak he had been out in the *William and Sarah* with a storm jib and a trysail, and the water over his lee-rail, and had come back wet, hungry, and exhausted. But his efforts had been in vain. He had seen nothing of John Shil or the missing boat.

"How be the lass?" he said, as his wife entered the room.

"She'll be right enough, so doctor says. But she's not to know nothin', Sam. 'Tis got to be kept from her."

"I ain't one for talking," the man replied gruffly, "but I can tell you I don't like this business, and if it weren't as I likes Mr Shil——"

"Don't talk of him," the woman said in an awe-struck voice. "He'm where your likes and dislikes won't reach him."

"No, poor chap. 'Tis no use they searchin', 'cept for the body. Sure, I never seed such a gale from sou'-east. 'Twas all we could do to weather it, and that little log of a punt. Lor' bless you, Mary, 'tweren't more'n an old box, and he no sailor, either."

"'Twere blowin' so hard night afore last."

"'Twere blowin' hard enough for him, and dark too, and rainin'. I reckon he lost his bearin's in the Darkwater, and got taken seawards. She'd make a lot of leeway, would that old punt."

"'Tis a ter'ble night," said Sam Dowsett after a long silence. The tone of his voice suggested that he had been considering the matter, and had been forced to come to this conclusion.

"Ay, sure," his wife replied, as she peeled a large misshapen potato. "Where be the boat? I've bin thinkin' there's a big sea runnin' against her moorin's."

"She'm right up the creek, on them old moorin's, as we don't use owin' to their bein' so far away. I thought it'd be better to take her up there. Bill's sleepin' aboard her t'night."

Mrs Dowsett nodded approval.

"And doctor's boat?" she asked.

"We towed her up."

"Is the old dinghy here?"

"Yes, for sure. She'm nearly on top of the bank. Why do you worrit about the boats so?"

"I was thinkin'," Mrs Dowsett replied, turning round to him, "'twill be a big tide to-night. We don't want to lose the old dinghy."

"The tide ain't never bin near her this last six months, and she wouldn't be much loss. I was thinkin' of choppin' her up for firewood."

"Well, you go and have a look at her," Mrs Dowsett replied with a wise look. "I watched the tide this mornin' arter you left. 'Twas near touchin' her then, and 'twill come up higher to-night."

"You go on peelin'," retorted Dowsett doggedly.

Mrs Dowsett laid down her knife and slowly wiped her hands on her apron. Then she left the room without a word, and went up the creaking stairs, which led straight out of the kitchen to Laura's room. In a minute or two she returned, and began to tie a shawl over her head.

"What be doin'?" growled Dowsett, regarding her with the lazy stare of a man who is too tired to think or move.

"The lass is asleep," his wife said in a low voice. "Poor thing! I doubt it'd be more merciful for her never to wake."

"Where be goin'?" the man asked.

"To look after the old dinghy. We don't want to lose her. She was built the year we—the year—you remember, Sam."

Dowsett rose to his feet and stretched his great arms.

"I'll go," he said gently. "I'd not lose her myself," and then he added, as though ashamed of his little scrap of sentiment, "They built them old boats well—I wouldn't lose her."

"I'll fetch 'ee the lantern." She retired into another and smaller chamber, which they called the scullery, and returned with a battered hurricane lamp. He took it from her, and when he had lit it, he opened the door and slipped out into the storm.

In five minutes' time Dowsett returned, and, as he slammed the door, his wife noticed an anxious expression on his face.

"What be wrong?" she asked quickly.

"I've pulled her to the top of the bank," he replied, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Then she'm all right?"

Dowsett did not answer, but, blowing out the lantern, he carried it into the scullery and set it down on the stone floor.

"I don't like the looks of it at all," he said, as he returned.

"What is the matter?" cried his wife angrily. "Can't 'ee speak out and be done with it?"

"The old boat's safe enough, she is," he replied, as he refilled his pipe. "But the tide was near halfway up her keel, and 'tis three hours off high water yet. I ain't never seed such a tide up the creek. I'm thinkin' 'twill top the wall in 'bout hour'n half."

"Top the wall," echoed Mrs Dowsett with a frightened look on her dull face. "You be a fool, Sam. I ain't never heard of the tide toppin' the wall of Con'sea."

"Well, mebbe, you'll hear of it t'night," he replied grimly, "and if 'tweren't for the lass upstairs, I'd put 'ee in the old dinghy and row 'ee up to the smack. 'Tis a chance we'll be washed out of our beds to-night."

"'Tis a good wall," murmured Mrs Dowsett doubtfully, "a powerful good wall."

"Ay, if wall holds, 'tis all right, sure enough. The house'll hold, tho' I'm thinkin' we'll have a foot or two of water in the kitchen."

"'Tis a strong wall," she reiterated doggedly. "Come and lend a hand with things in the parlour. I wouldn't have that new carpet spoilt for all the boats in Christendom."

The words contained the simple creed of her existence. She was not concerned with her own life, or the danger which threatened it. All her thoughts were for the few things which represented the savings of years, the hard-earned trifles which formed her worldly wealth.

The man rose to his feet without a word, and they both occupied the next hour in removing their treasured belongings to a room upstairs. The work was done swiftly but quietly, so as not to disturb Laura from her sleep. A separate staircase—a kind of glorified ladder—led up from the parlour to their own bedroom, and up this steep ascent Sam Dowsett staggered with load after load of household treasures. They stripped the room of everything that the water could possibly damage. Carpets, curtains, stuffed birds, books, woolly mats, china dogs, wax flowers, chairs, fender, rug, cushions were all removed to a place of safety.

When they had completed their task Sam Dowsett looked doubtfully at the bed, which was heaped up high with books and china.

"I'm doubtin' where we'll sleep," he said after a pause.

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"Mebbe there won't be any sleep for us to-night," his wife replied. "I've the lass to watch, and I'm thinkin' you may be busy."

They looked at each other in silence. Their minds had been entirely occupied with the saving of their little worldly treasures. But now both the man and woman had themselves to think of, and the presence of a helpless stranger did not sweeten their thoughts. The same idea was in both their minds, and there was the same mute question in their eyes.

"'Tis a good wall," said the man. Then he paused and listened. A long, melancholy howl rose above the din and clatter of the storm. It sounded faint and far away, but a man's shout might have done the same in that tumult of wind and sea.

"'Tis the marsh dog," whispered Mrs Dowsett in a frightened voice. "I ain't never heard him yet, though father seed him once. He'm as big as a horse, and black as a lump of coal, and when he howls, 'tis a sure sign of evil."

"Don't be a fool," replied Sam angrily. "'Tis old Kipper howlin' in his kennel."

But, as if in contradiction to his words, there came a loud angry bark from the back of the house, and it was answered by another howl, louder and more distinct than the last.

"'Tis the marsh dog," said Mrs Dowsett, making her way down the ladder. "I do hope he won't find our Kipper."

Sam followed her down the ladder, and, as they made their way back to the kitchen, they heard the howling close to the door of the cottage. Kipper barked furiously, as if to show that he at any rate had nothing to do with this melancholy noise.

"'Tis some poor dog from one of the barges," said Sam, going to the door, and flinging it wide open. The wind burst into the room, and there was another long howl.

"Good dog!" said Sam, and then, as he whistled encouragingly, a dripping animal slunk into the room, and crouched pitifully at Mrs Dowsett's feet. Sam closed the door, and looked at the miserable object. Then suddenly he strode forward and rolled it over on its back.

"'Tis Pat," he said quickly, "Mr Shil's dog. Poor brute! He's had a bad time."

And indeed it was a very different dog from the sleek glossy animal that had last come to the cottage. His wet matted hair clung close to his skin, and showed the outline of his bones. He

was painfully thin and apparently so weak that he could hardly move.

"Tain't mad, I s'pose," said Mrs Dowsett.

"Mad," retorted her husband, "no, he'm starved and done up. Get him a bit of food and water, that's a good woman, and I'll have a look outside. P'raps his master ain't a long way off. Dogs be mighty faithful, and I've heard of 'em staying by a body till——" But seeing that his wife had disappeared, he paused, and, fetching the lantern, he lit it and opened the door. Then he climbed up the wooden steps in the bank outside.

As he neared the top of the stair, a wave came foaming over the edge, and the dinghy, nicely balanced on a foot of its keel, came rolling down the slope, and crashed into the wall of the house itself.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BLIND SHIP

THE heavy boat missed Dowsett's left shoulder by a bare six inches, and the wave drenched him from head to foot. Then the door was flung open, and Mrs Dowsett appeared against the background of light.

"What be up? What be up?" she screamed, her thin, sharp voice rising above the tumult of the storm. "Come down, you fule; the house is fallin'."

And, indeed, the worthy woman might well have supposed that the heavens themselves were crashing down on her cottage, for the dinghy had shaken the wooden building with such violence that the plates had danced off the kitchen shelves.

The man slowly descended the ladder, and his wife seized him by the arm.

"'Tis only th' old boat," he growled. "'Tain't knocked the house down, has her? The water's begun to top the bank, and a wave lopped over and rolled her down."

Lantern in hand, he inspected the timbers of the house. Two of them were spilt from end to end, but that was the sole extent of the damage. Mrs Dowsett was reassured, but she cast an anxious glance at the tall bank of earth and stone.

"'Tis a good wall," she muttered. "'Twill hold. Come you in, Sam, and change clothes, afore you get chilled."

"I'll take the boat round t'other side of the house," he replied. "There'll be a deal of water down this bank afore tide turns, and mebbe she'll bump a hole in us and herself as well. Lend a hand, will 'ee?"

He caught hold of the boat with his powerful hands, and dragged it along the path to the back of the cottage. Mrs Dowsett lent the assistance of her thin, muscular arms.

Scarcely had they reached the shelter of the building when a great wave curled over the top of the bank and surged round the house in a flood of water six inches deep.

"The door's open," screamed Mrs Dowsett, and, entering by the back door, she splashed and paddled along the passage till she reached the kitchen. The water was an inch deep on the floor, but Pat slept calmly before the fire, too exhausted to move from his unenviable position.

Mrs Dowsett closed the door and bolted it, and her husband brought in an old piece of sailcloth and laid it against the bottom of the woodwork. This, weighted with a few pieces of scrap iron, formed some kind of obstruction to the water which might force its way in through the crack.

"We'd best get upstairs," he said grimly, "if us don't want to get our feet wet."

There was a loud crash against the wall of the house, and, as the door rattled, thin streams of water squirted under the canvas. A look of fear came into Mrs Dowsett's face.

"'Tis nowt," the man said, with a cheery laugh. "'Twill all drain off into th' big ditch behind, and there's eight hundred acre of land for it to spread itself in. I'm thinkin' we needn't have moved owt but the carpet."

"But the wall, Sam," she muttered, "if she goes—I ain't afeard. I'm thinkin' of that poor lass upstairs. God send she sleep sound through all this."

"'Tis a good wall," he replied sturdily; "father helped to build her, and he said 'twas a good wall, and he oughter know. You get upstairs, that's a good woman, and I'll fetch Kipper afore he gets drowned. You take Pat along of you, and put him in the lass's room. We can't have a dog fight on top of all this row."

Mrs Dowsett went upstairs and half dragged, half coaxed the miserable Pat into Laura's bedroom. He lay down in a corner, and feebly licked his paws. Laura, still under the influence of the drug which Dr Hardy had given her, slept soundly, and neither the din of the storm, nor the roar of the waves against the sea-wall, nor the continual splash and clatter of the water against the side of the house itself roused her from her sleep.

"God send the sleepin' stuff hold," Mrs Dowsett murmured, much as a mariner might speak of his cable.

Then Dowsett appeared with the collie, and before the dog

could growl or cry out at Pat's presence, he was kicked through the door on to a heap of curtains.

"You sit with the lass," said Dowsett. "I'll go into the lumber room, and keep an eye on the creek and the old wall. I'll hang a lantern or two outside, and, as they say in papers, report progress."

He spoke lightly, but, as he entered the other bedroom and closed the door behind him, his heart was heavy indeed. He knew that if the wall gave—and there was yet another hour of flood to run—nothing on earth could save them. The house, and all in it, would be swept into one roaring, pitiless sea of destruction. He threaded his way carefully through the piles of furniture, and, reaching the window, opened it. He could see nothing within the light of the lamp he held in his hand but a mist of spray, caught up by the wind and hurled into his face.

When he had left Laura's bedroom, his wife shaded the lamp so that its light should not fall on the eyes of the sleeping girl, and then sat down by the bedside and commenced to darn some socks. Her dull white face, thrown into relief by the lamp against a background of darkness, looked as though it had been cut out of stone by some barbaric workman. It was ugly and motionless, and absolutely without expression. But the eyes were fixed on a ragged sock, and the busy fingers moved unceasingly. One of the blessings granted to those who live their monotonous lives without impatience or intelligence, is that they can pursue their ordinary avocations in a crisis which would reduce more sensitive natures to the verge of prostration. At any moment the sea wall might give way, and Mrs Dowsett would be forced to struggle vainly with death. But she continued to darn, as though everything depended on the result of her labours.

The noise of the sea on the wall increased as the tide rose and began to pour over the top in a continuous cataract. The spray beat against the glass with such violence that the window rattled in its frame. In the room underneath, Mrs Dowsett could hear the swish and swirl of water, as though the floor had been converted into an inland sea.

Then there was a loud crash, and a blast of air rushing up the staircase, told its own story. The front door had given way. Mrs Dowsett rose to her feet, and, opening the door leading to the other bedroom, called out to her husband.

"Door's gone," she said quickly. "You'd best go down and have a look."

"'Tis just as well she's gone," he replied. "'Twill let the water through. 'Tis sluicing against the house like a river. I reckon bank's gone lower down; but it takes a deal of water to flood eight hundred acres. 'Tain't more'n a foot deep outside. There's a boat a-comin' up the Darkwater. I seed her starboard light just now."

Mrs Dowsett closed the door and returned to the bedside. As she resumed her seat Laura gave a deep sigh and opened her eyes.

"Where am I?" she whispered faintly, as she stared round the unfamiliar room.

"You'm all right, dearie," said Mrs Dowsett, smoothing down the pillow with a gentle hand. "You'm at Dowsett's farm, as safe and quiet as you'd be anywhere in the world."

"Why?" she murmured. "Why? Oh, I remember, I must have fainted. How silly of me!"

"Hush, dearie. Don't 'ee talk. Just you lie quiet. You've been ill, but 'tis all right now. You've just got to lie quiet."

"Where is Mr Shil?" Laura asked in a peevish voice.

"He's been here and looked after you, miss. He'm gone now for a bit of rest, but he'll be back in the mornin'. And when he come, he'll like to find you fresh and well, so don't worry your head, miss, with thinking 'bout anything."

"Thinking?" Laura murmured wearily. "Oh, if I could only forget; if I could only forget!"

A sudden blast of wind shook the house like an earthquake, and a mass of water, whirled from the top of a wave, crashed against the window, and shattered the glass into fifty pieces. A drop of spray touched Laura's cheek and she shivered.

"What has happened?" she moaned. "What is it? I am frightened."

"'Tis nothing," Mrs Dowsett replied with a mirthless laugh. "'Tis only blowin' a bit, and a high tide runnin' against the wall. We'm used to it, I and Dowsett. 'Tis allus like this with a gale from sou'-east. I'll stop up the hole, lest the cold get you."

She rose to her feet and proceeded to move a small table against the window. On this foundation she placed a large trunk, and covered it over with an old piece of carpet. The barrier was effective enough as a makeshift. Laura watched her with wondering eyes. Her mind was too feeble to grasp details; and she had not the slightest idea of the danger which threatened

the house and all its occupants. She only knew that there had been a draught, and that Mrs Dowsett had supplied a remedy.

"Will 'ee have a drop of hot milk?" said that worthy woman, as she resumed her seat by the bedside. "'Twill be time for medicine in an hour."

"No," murmured Laura impatiently. "No. If I could only sleep. I was so happy when I slept."

"'Twill be medicine time in an hour," Mrs Dowsett replied, "and then you'll sleep again, dearie."

Laura turned over on her side, and began to cry quietly. It was the helpless sobbing of an exhausted child, without strength or passion—a mere whisper, pitiful to listen to.

"Hush, hush," said Mrs Dowsett, speaking as she might have spoken to a child. "You're in good hands, miss, and don't let the storm worrit you. 'Tis only a great noise, such as a dog makes when he barks. 'Twon't bite."

"I wish I could die," moaned Laura. She was not thinking of the storm which beat against the house, but of the storm which had wrecked her own life. The absence of John Shil was preying on her mind. In her weakness she saw in him the only strong and trustworthy thing in life. She longed for the touch of his hand, for the sound of his voice, for even the sight of him.

"Don't 'ee talk like that, miss," said Mrs Dowsett sternly. "'Tis temptin' Providence, Who has said that in the midst of life we are in death."

To Laura the words were only a commonplace sentiment. She did not know, as the speaker knew, how appropriate they were at a time when death was knocking, ay, thundering, at the door of the house.

"There be much for all of us to do in the world," Mrs Dowsett continued, "and not 'nuff time to do it. Even in Con'sea there be things to do. I'm old, missie, and take things quietly, but there was a time when I was hot-blooded and over-full of pride, and it seemed hard to suffer. But the Lord, He broke me, and 'twas all for good. But there, dearie, don't trouble your head 'bout such things. You just lie still and think of sunshine. 'Twill come after the storm, sure 'nuff, 'twill come."

"It will never come," whispered Laura softly. "What can you know of sin here in Conasea?"

"Sin?" echoed Mrs Dowsett harshly; "ay, what should I know of sin, here in Con'sea, save that the Lord chastens sinners, and 'tis all for good."

Laura was silent, but the words had sunk deeply into her mind. It is true that she had only sinned in thought, but for all that she had suffered. Of a truth God had chastened her.

After a few minutes' silence there was a grinding crash from the back of the house; then the door leading into the next room opened slightly, and Dowsett beckoned to his wife.

"I'll be back in a minute, dear," she said, as she rose to her feet. "Dowsett wants me."

"I shall be all right," Laura replied faintly.

Mrs Dowsett entered the other bedroom and closed the door. Her husband stood among a pile of chairs with a lantern in his hand. There was a look of anxiety on his rugged face.

"She'm come to her senses?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, poor lass. She be wide awake."

"Well, you'd best put her to sleep," he replied. "Give her some of that sleepin' stuff. I doubt if the house holds another ten minutes. One of the uprights has given at the back, and there's three feet of water down below."

"Tide'll turn soon," muttered Mrs Dowsett, "and 'tis a good wall."

"Oh, ay, the wall will hold. But the seas topped it by more'n a foot, and the waves are comin' over it by four foot in places. If we was a bit closer to it, we'd have been washed away like one of them castles children build in the sand. Just have a look. 'Tis a moderate clear sky now, and moon's up. That boat's still a-rolling up the creek like a drunken man. Side to side she go, just anyhow."

Mrs Dowsett threaded her way to one of the windows, and looked out across the sea, and, as she looked, she drew back with a cry of terror. And the sight was indeed one to strike fear into a woman's heart.

A long vista of black hollows and white-crested waves stretched as far as the eye could reach, and the surface of the water seemed almost on a level with the sill of the window. The whole sea appeared to be poised above the land, only held in check by the wall, and ready to launch its stupendous volume of water over the island. All along the wall it poured over in a continuous cataract, like a river over a weir. It was not the mere breaking of waves over the embankment, but the steady stream of water, which had risen above the level of the obstacle which confronted it. Every wave rolled smoothly over with nothing to impede its course, and crashed into the eddying lake below.

"'Tis the judgment of God," she cried. "'Tis the Lord's judgment on me, the sinner."

"Don't talk foolish," retorted her husband. "Have a look out of t'other window at the back. 'Tis more peaceful."

Mrs Dowsett looked, and saw a smooth lake of water stretching as far as the distant hills. A few hours ago it had all been grassland intersected with creeks. She also saw that the old dinghy was rocking in the swirl of the waters, and that it was held by a rope to a ring outside the window.

"The boat," she exclaimed. "You'm goin' in that?"

"Yes," he replied, "'tis calm enough out there, so long as the bank holds. Send the lass to sleep, and wrap her up well in blankets."

Mrs Dowsett disappeared, and her husband returned to the window facing the sea. The boat, which he had been watching for some time, was now close to the house, and he could see it plainly in the moonlight. She was a fishing smack of about twenty tons, and she had been zigzagging up the estuary from the open sea, under a jib. A crumpled mass of sail and spars hung over her port side, and Dowsett imagined it to be all that was left of the mainsail. She was pursuing an erratic course, as though some drunkard were at the helm, and her jib continually shifted from side to side. She was now within a hundred yards of the house, and apparently heading straight for the sea wall. Dowsett called to his wife.

"Look at yon boat," he cried, as she entered the room. "The lubber's lost his head, or he'm blind drunk. P'raps he thinks 'tis all open sea, and he'm sailin' into calm water t'other side of wall. God help us if he hits it."

He threw open the window and yelled, but the smack drove on, with her bowsprit pointing straight at the house. Then his face grew white, for he saw that the man at the helm made no attempt to alter his course.

He gave one look at the black hull, which seemed to be poised above them, and descending in a shower of white foam. Then he rushed into the next room and caught up Laura in his arms.

The next moment there was a crash, and a shock which sent Dowsett staggering to the floor. The smack had rushed against the bank with such force that she had run half over the top of it, and had driven her bowsprit clean through the wooden walls of the cottage.

CHAPTER XXX

FRIENDS IN ADVERSITY

WHEN Tankerlane left Black Hall after his interview with John Shil, he walked towards the west gate of the park, and, as good fortune would have it, he encountered one of the underkeepers, who was just returning from his round on the hill farm. He stopped the man, and, under pretence of asking his way, engaged him in conversation.

The man, who did not suspect that Tankerlane had any other motive than that of idle gossip, and who scented a possible tip from a friend of his master's, spoke freely, and it was not long before the subtle mind of the baronet led the conversation round to the subject on which he required information. Then, without asking any actual question, he ascertained what he wished to find out—namely, that John Shil had been away all the previous night in the marshes, and had not returned till four o'clock that afternoon.

He gave the man five shillings, said good night, and followed the road which ran round the outside of the park. He was no detective, but he had a certain amount of common-sense, and was capable of drawing a reasonable inference from the facts in his possession. There was nothing peculiar in John Shil spending his night in the marshes to shoot wild duck, but a man usually returns from such an expedition in the morning and not in the afternoon. Now Tankerlane had already learned that a woman resembling Laura had been seen in the vicinity of Black Hall shortly after daybreak, and, putting two and two together, he came to the conclusion that she had encountered John Shil before he returned to Black Hall, and that the latter had taken her to some hiding-place in the marshes, and then sailed back to his own home. The only thing he could not understand was how Laura was able to

undertake a journey if she were dangerously ill. He was half inclined to think that Shil had lied to him.

The result of his conclusions was that he resolved to watch the park on the side which faced the marshes. He kept to the road as long as it ran close to the wall, and when it turned off inland, he followed a narrow path till it came to another road, one that bounded the park on the east. He followed this till he reached the little quay at the end of the creek.

It was a moonlight night and he could see everything clearly. He noticed the punt, and his first impulse was to get into it and row towards the sea. He pictured John Shil's face when he came down to the quay and found that the boat had gone.

But a few moments' thought convinced him of the hopelessness of such an enterprise. He knew nothing of the creeks, and the desolation of the marshland did not appeal to him. He conjured up visions of what might happen to him if he lost his way and found himself stranded on a mudbank. And there might be other dangers lurking in that wilderness of marsh and water, of which he, a landsman if ever there was one, could not even guess the magnitude. It would be only waste of time to grope about for Laura's hiding-place without a guide, and in a craft which appeared to possess neither speed nor safety.

He resolved, therefore, to wait in the shadow of the trees, and see if Shil went down to the creek. If the latter rowed off in the punt, he could leave at once for the nearest village, and try to obtain a boat and a man who knew the district.

He waited under the trees for two hours, and experienced a physical discomfort that increased the bitterness of his spirit. Sir William Tankerlane was not used to roughing it, and from his earliest boyhood he had been accustomed to find everything that he wanted ready to his hand. But now he had not tasted food for several hours, he was exceedingly thirsty, and the cold raw air of the marshes chilled him from head to foot. He did not dare to move about or stamp his feet, or even light a cigarette. He had already heard men's voices in the wood behind him, and he remembered that Shil had threatened to deal hardly with him if he lingered in the neighbourhood.

At last, however, Shil himself appeared with the keeper, and Tankerlane shrank close against the wall, and watched him go down to the punt. He knew well enough that they could not see him, but he was afraid of the dog which slunk behind their heels. Pat, however, whose previous efforts at foretelling

danger and disaster had met with such a chilling reception, was not inclined to render further service to his master. He detected a stranger's presence, but he contented himself with a sniff and a furtive glance behind him, and continued his dejected progress towards the boat.

Tankerlane could not hear most of the conversation which passed between Shil and the keeper. But, as luck would have it, he distinctly heard one sentence of the keeper's last remark.

"I'd make straight for them islands t'other side of creek, and breakfast at Con'sea."

Probably the words had been spoken more loudly, as a greater distance then separated the speaker from the man in the boat. But, in any case, Tankerlane heard the sentence, and understood that it was a valuable clue.

"Con'sea," he muttered to himself. "That's the place I'll get to. I wonder if it's marked on the map."

He watched John Shil hoist his sail and glide down the creek, and he waited till the footsteps of the keeper, who had passed through the gate into the wood, had died away in the distance. Then, with a sigh of relief, he stepped out on to the road, and rapidly retraced his steps to the railway station, which seemed to be the only habitation besides Black Hall in the dreary wilderness of marshland.

The brisk walk put warmth into his cold feet and vigour into his stiff limbs, and, when he arrived at the station, he felt that, after a good meal and a glass of whisky and soda, he would be equal to any task that he might have to undertake. He pictured to himself a thick chop and fried potatoes, and even the thought of bread and cheese was sweet to him.

But when he interrogated the sulky-looking porter who loitered aimlessly about the platform, he learnt that none of these delicacies could be procured without a further walk of three miles to the Blue Anchor.

"Perhaps the station-master will oblige me," he said, holding out half-a-crown.

The man took the money and mumbled out inarticulate gratitude. Then he paused and looked down the line as if seeking inspiration.

"He'm a vegetarian," he said, after a long pause. "He don't hold with folks as he calls 'guzzlers.' He live on bread and slops, he do, and I don't reckon 'tis good stuff, judgin' by his temper. He'm sour as a green apple."

"I'll walk to the inn," said Tankerlane sharply, and then he remembered that it would be no good remaining in the neighbourhood unless he could get a boat.

"I want a boat," he said suddenly.

The porter gaped at him with open mouth and eyes. The man's slow mind could not guess at the quick transition of thought. He thought he was confronted with a madman, who wanted to feed on timber and sailcloth.

"Boat?" he said stupidly, "what be wantin' with boat?"

"I want a boat and a man to row it or sail it, and I want it at once. Do you know of anyone who has got a boat, and would like to earn a couple of sovereigns?"

"Can't get to the Blue Anchor by boat," the man replied with a chuckle. "'Tis along the road."

"Damn the Blue Anchor and you too," exclaimed Tankerlane, now thoroughly exasperated. "I want a boat to go down the creeks. Do you know of anyone who's got such a thing?"

"Boat?" mumbled the man, scratching his head to stimulate thought. "Down the creeks? Lord love you, sir, there ain't no boat in these parts, less you can borrow Mr Shil's punt."

"Do you mean to say," cried Tankerlane, "that there are no boats in this country, which seems chock full of water? How the devil do you get about it?"

"No, there ain't no boats," the man replied slowly. "We've no call for boats. Them as has boats come from sea, and not from land. We ain't marsh folk in Pinge."

"Do you mean to say that I can't get a boat anywhere near here?"

"No, you can't, for certain. But there's plenty of boats at Gor'ven. Fishin' boats, yachts, steamin' boats, most anythin' you please."

"Do you know Con'sea?" asked Tankerlane, pronouncing the name as he had heard it from the lips of the keeper.

"I ain't never heard of it. But you'd best go to Gor'ven, and they'll larn you all about boats and marshes. I come of inland folk, I do; I ain't never bin in a boat, and by the Lord's help I never will."

Tankerlane looked at the man in blank amazement. The station of Pinge was but two miles from the creeks, and here was a man who had never been in a boat.

"How far is Gor'ven?" he asked.

"Matter o' twenty mile."

"When is there a train?"

"In ten minutes, if it ain't late."

"How long does it take to get there?"

"Matter of an hour."

"Great Scott!" cried Tankerlane, mad with impatience. "This must be the end of the world. I suppose I can get food there, or are they all vegetarians?"

"There be seventeen publics there," the man replied proudly.

"Where is the booking office?" asked Tankerlane. He had resolved to spend the night in a place where he could obtain a boat and commence his search in the morning. "Gor'ven," as the porter called it, was evidently part of the civilised world.

The porter did not reply, but led the way to a small black shed covered with tarred felt. After fumbling in his pocket for a key he opened a door, and slid back a tiny hatch in the wall.

"Where for?" he said mechanically, as though the words were necessary to give validity to the issue of the ticket.

"Gor'ven," replied Tankerlane sharply. "First-class single——"

The man retired from the opening, and mooned round the inside of the hut, looking at the various tickets in their little pigeon-holes. When he had spent three minutes in this apparently pleasing occupation, Tankerlane lost his temper.

"Hurry up!" he exclaimed savagely, "I can't wait here all night while you're taking a walk."

"There ain't no hurry," the man said sullenly. "Train's twenty minutes late."

"I'll report you to the station-master, if you don't look sharp."

"You'd best not, sir," the man replied. "'Tis his day for beans on Friday, and they'm as bad as meat for him. He gets that cross and uppish, and he kick just like an old horse. He can't a-bear strangers worriting him 'bout trains. But here's ticket, if you'm in a hurry."

He stamped the slip of pink cardboard and handed it to Tankerlane, who looked at it, and saw that the name of the station was Gorehaven.

"Can't you get me a drink of water?" Tankerlane asked in a conciliatory tone.

"Can't leave booking office now 'tis open," the man replied. "But there's a tap round corner."

Tankerlane swore loudly, but he was too thirsty to waste

much time in abuse. He found the tap, and, turning it on, drank out of his hands. The water was slightly brackish and metallic in taste, but it relieved his thirst.

Half an hour afterwards the last train from London steamed slowly into the platform. Tankerlane watched the lighted carriages pass by him. Then, just as the train came to a standstill, he gave a start, and moved a step or two backwards into the darkness of the dimly-lit station. He had seen the face of Leonore looking through the glass of one of the windows.

"Pinge, Pinge, Pinge," cried the porter, who had closed the booking-office and was slouching along the platform, lantern in hand. No one got out of the train, but the bearded station-master appeared at the door of his house, and stroked his yellow beard. Then, with a look of contempt at the train, he retired and closed the door behind him.

The porter, who appeared to be in charge of every department in the station, waved his lantern, and the guard of the train blew a whistle. Then the train began to move, and not till then did Tankerlane leave the shadow of the wooden roof, and make a dash for Leonore's carriage. He knew well enough that she would have changed to another compartment if he had appeared a moment sooner. As it was, he would be able to talk to her until the next stopping-place. He opened the door, and, jumping into the carriage, seated himself opposite the woman who had once been his wife.

Leonore was too astonished to cry out. She was frightened, but she allowed no trace of fear to show itself in her face. She merely smiled contemptuously.

"It's a pity you didn't get in sooner," she said, as he placed his hat on the rack.

"I suppose you'd have got out."

"I shall get out at the next station. A few minutes won't matter much."

"I think I can say all I want to say in that time," he replied coolly. "I suppose you're surprised to see me."

"What have you been up to at Black Hall?" she queried. "After your oath to me, you can have nothing to say to John Shil."

Tankerlane's face darkened, as he thought of the interview he had just had with John Shil. He had had a good deal to say, and he had yet more to do.

"Look here, Leonore," he said harshly, "we are nothing

to each other now. But our interests are the same—you want to marry Shil, and I——” He paused. He wondered how much she knew.

“You want nothing,” she replied, “save the love of your wife, and that you’ll never get ; and it is a matter in which I am powerless to help you.”

He leant forward in his seat and looked into her face.

“Do you mean to say that you do not know?” he said slowly. “Has no one told you that my wife has left me, and that she has returned to her lover, to John Shil, the man who is going to marry you?”

Leonore listened to his slow, incisive words, as though she did not hear them. But every word pierced her to the heart. The agony was not written on her face, and only the eyes, dull and piteous, betrayed her pain.

“Do you understand this?” he repeated. “Do you realise what it means? How you have plotted and planned in vain ; how the man has broken free from the net you have spread so carefully for him?”

“It is a lie,” she whispered with a white, expressionless face. “Your wife is not at Black Hall.”

“I am aware of that,” he replied, “or I should not have left it without her. Do you see this?” and he pulled out his revolver. “If Laura had been at Black Hall, I’d have taken her away, even though I might have had to kill the man you love. But she is not there. She is somewhere in the marsh-land, in some place where he has taken her. I have let him live in order that I may find her. He has gone down the creek to-night in a punt—to shoot duck. I could not follow him, for I couldn’t get a boat or a man to pilot me through the marshes. And this is not all. Laura is ill—perhaps dying. I had it from his own lips, and I could see that he spoke the truth. He has gone to see her, to be with her, if the worst happens, and I—her husband—am here. But, by Heaven, if she dies, I’ll kill him first and then put a bullet through my own head.”

“I hope she will die,” Leonore said earnestly, and then, as if realising the vileness of her words, she shrank back in the corner of the carriage, and buried her face in her hands.

“Her death will not benefit you,” the man continued, “for I swear that I will kill him if she dies. Then there will be only you and I left, Leonore. And if I don’t shoot myself, perhaps they’ll hang me—I’m not sure, for a British jury

sympathise with an outraged husband. But if they do, you will be left alone, out of this nice little quartette of ours. I don't envy you, Leonore."

She did not answer him, and the train began to slow down. It had reached the next dreary shed, apparently erected for the sole purpose of delaying it, for no one was on the platform, and no one alighted from any of the carriages.

Tankerlane opened the door of the carriage; but Leonore did not move from her seat.

"Are you going to get into another carriage?" he asked.

"No," she replied. He closed the door, and the train began to crawl out of the station.

"I hope you see how the matter stands, Leonore?" he said after a pause. "I hope you realise that we have common interests and can help each other."

She did not answer, but stared out of the window into the darkness.

"We must separate these two at once," he continued. "Laura is my wife, and I have the law on my side to help me. John Shil has promised to marry you, and you must keep him to his word."

She turned away from the window and her eyes flashed.

"He is a man of honour," she cried. "He will keep his word."

"It does not look as if he intended doing so. I have no doubt that he would have married you, and would never have tried to see her again, but, unfortunately, she has taken the matter in her own hands. She has left me and come to him for protection. At present she is very ill, but when she is restored to health—well, it will be a great temptation for both of them. I am afraid, my dear Leonore, that your beloved Shil is only human after all."

"Well?" she asked in a dull voice. "What do you propose to do?"

"I propose to find her while she is still an invalid, and use my authority as a husband to take her back to Tankerlane Court. I am now going to Gorehaven to charter a boat, and the services of two men, and I shall not leave these parts till I have accomplished my task."

"Well?" asked Leonore coldly, "and what do you wish me to do?"

"I wish you to see John Shil at once, and get him to fix an early date for your marriage. If he is, as you say, a man of

honour, he will not go back on his word. But I should not advise you to rely too much on his strength of mind. I shall take Laura back to Tankerlane Court, and you had better secure your prize while she is out of the way. Then we shall all live happily ever afterwards."

"You brute," she said, in a tone of disgust. "Is it possible you can talk like this, when your wife is dying?"

The man's face changed, and a look of fear came into his eyes.

"I did not ask to be reminded of that," he said hoarsely. "When I think of it, I am a murderer. I try to think that she will live, that she will return to me. I could kill both you and Shil, if I thought it would save her life, ay, even if I knew that she would never see me or speak to me again."

"I don't think it will be necessary to do any killing," Leonore replied quietly. "We live, after all, in an age when very little is accomplished by brute force. By the bye, I suppose you know that Henry Blurton is dead."

"I did not know it. But the news does not interest me."

"I thought it might. You see you are now the only witness of what happened in that wood by Laverstone. And your tongue is tied."

"I can cut the knot in an emergency," said Tankerlane grimly. "How did the little beast die?"

"Drank himself to death, or, as his poor old mother called it, 'Pneumonia and weak health.' He caught a chill, I believe, through sleeping off a debauch in the rain. She wrote to me about it."

"Most interesting," Tankerlane replied. "Did she mention the question of money?"

"Not a word. He kept faith well. His secret died with him. Poor little chap!"

Tankerlane shrugged his shoulders, and looked at Leonore's face.

"Why are you going to Gorehaven?" he asked abruptly.

"Change of air," she replied.

"You may as well be frank with me. We'd better pull together in this matter."

"I am going there to be near Mr Shil."

"Near?" queried Tankerlane in a sarcastic voice.

"Well, the train only takes an hour, and it's three hours' journey from town. I have a lot to arrange and talk over."

"I see. You, too, are anxious for the marriage to take place as soon as possible. Did Shil know you were coming to-night?"

She did not answer. She had written to Shil, but in the stress of recent events he had evidently forgotten all about her arrival. She had asked him to meet her at Pinge Station as she passed through. It was his form that she had looked for when her eyes had followed Sir William Tankerlane's retreat into the darkness.

"Poor Leonore," said Tankerlane. "He must have forgotten you. But he is too busy to think of anyone but Laura now."

The insult told, as he had intended it should tell. Leonore flushed scarlet with shame, and then her face grew white and hard.

"I would advise you, Leonore," he continued, "to see John Shil to-morrow, and arrange for the marriage to take place before the end of this month."

"I shall do whatever I think best," she replied coldly.

"On the contrary," he retorted, "I have to be considered in the matter, for the day John Shil succeeds in taking my wife from me, will be a bad day for all of us. You understand that, Leonore."

"You mean that you will break the oath you swore to me. Well, I do not care if you do. That is a matter between yourself and your God. I believe Mr Shil to be a man of honour, but, if I am mistaken, I shall not spare him. You will be as useful to me as Henry Blurton would have been. I cannot afford to be fastidious in my choice of weapons."

Tankerlane winced at the insult, and then he smiled.

"Thank you for your candour," he replied. "At any rate you see that our interests are identical."

"I am sorry to say they are. I would rather have you on the other side."

"Well, we must take things as they are," he said sarcastically. "At any rate you can reckon on my help."

They were both silent, and then there came a sharp sleet of rain against the windows.

"It's going to be a nasty night," said Tankerlane. "I'm glad I am not out in the creeks."

"They're sheltered enough," Leonore replied. She was thinking of John Shil, and, being quite ignorant of everything connected with the district, she firmly believed that the Dark-water was like the Thames at Maidenhead.

"I hope so, for I shall be on them to-morrow morning, and I'm no sailor. Do you mind if I smoke? I haven't had anything to eat for hours, and tobacco may allay the pangs of hunger."

"I don't mind," she replied, and then they both relapsed into silence.

The thoughts of both man and woman were in harmony with the storm which raged outside the warm and well-lighted carriage. Leonore was thinking of the cup of happiness, for which she had striven so long, and which might yet be dashed to the ground before she could grasp it. Tankerlane was thinking of his wife, who perhaps even at that moment was passing beyond the touch of all earthly things, with her hand in the grasp of another man.

Neither spoke another word till the train reached Gorehaven. As they alighted on the platform, an obsequious porter came forward and offered his services.

"Which is the best hotel here?" Tankerlane asked.

"The Green Man, sir, or the Red Lion; they be 'bout the same. I can recommend 'em both."

"Which?" asked Tankerlane, turning to Leonore.

"Red Lion," she replied.

"Take the lady's baggage," Tankerlane continued, "and see that it goes up to the Red Lion."

"One black trunk marked with a red Maltese cross," said Leonore.

The man departed to look for the trunk.

"I will go to the Green Man," said Tankerlane abruptly. "I wish you good night. To-morrow you will see John Shil, and I should advise you to insist on the marriage taking place at the end of this month. To-morrow I shall go out to look for my wife. Your prayers will be with me, I am sure. It's a nasty night. I hope Shil is enjoying his trip down the creek."

"Good night," said Leonore.

"Shall I see you to your hotel?"

"No, thanks. Good night."

Tankerlane turned away, and after a few words with the porter he buttoned up his overcoat and went out into the storm.

Little did he think, as he walked through the wind and rain to the Green Man, that all the elements were fighting for him that night.

CHAPTER XXXI

BLACK SPIT ISLAND

"OH ay, I knows Con'sea well. And what might you be wantin' at Con'sea?" The brown-faced fisherman spat on the ground and sucked thoughtfully at his empty pipe. He and Tankerlane stood under the lee of a shed on the edge of Gorehaven quay. The wind blew fiercely from the nor'-east, and the waters of the harbour were ruffled into tiny white-capped waves. Farther away down the short wide creek which led to the open sea long rollers went westwards in thin lines of foam.

"I want your boat," said Tankerlane, "and men to manage her—men who know the creeks well. I may want her for a week."

The man peered round the corner of the shed to windward.

"I don't like the looks of it," he said gruffly. "'Twill be worse afore it's better, I'm thinkin'. The glass is ter'ble low this mornin'. 'Tain't no weather for yachtin'."

"Well, I must have a boat, and she must go out regardless of the weather. I reckon you've often been out fishing in a worse blow than this."

"Oh ay," the man replied, "we've our livin' to earn. This be nothin' much, but it's what's a'-comin' I'm afeard of."

"I'll give you fifty pounds for the use of your boat for a week, and if I want her for more than a week, I'll pay you five pounds a day."

The man's eyes sparkled, and he looked at Tankerlane as though he scarcely dared to believe that he had heard him aright.

"Fifty poun', did 'ee say, sir? Did I understan' 'ee to say fifty poun' and five poun' a day arterwards?"

"Yes. But you must start at once—within an hour from now."

• The fisherman looked at the clock which faced the harbour.

"'Tis now 'bout ten, sir. I'll find my mate, and we'll take you aboard at half-past, if you'll come down to the 'hard.' Ask for Bill Yardley of the *Hope and Glory*. Will you order the food, sir, or will you leave it to us?"

"I'll order it," Tankerlane replied. "I have nothing to do till we start."

"I'd buy a thick jersey or summat of that sort, sir, if I were you. We can find you oilskins, but I doubt if you'd care to wear our old jerseys."

"Half-past ten sharp," said Tankerlane, as he turned away into the little town.

He spent the next half hour in purchasing everything that obsequious shopmen could persuade him to buy. He knew nothing of provisioning a boat for a week's cruise, and was in the hands of those who were aware of his ignorance. Gorehaven is a small place, but it possesses one shop where almost anything that has ever been put into tins or glass jars can be purchased. Tankerlane ordered a small cartload of delicacies to be sent down to the "hard," and was not even allowed to forget the more necessary articles, such as bread, butter, eggs, tea, and bacon. He also ordered three dozen large bottles of beer and half a dozen bottles of whisky.

At half-past ten to the minute a small army of errand boys and shop assistants loaded up the large dinghy of the *Hope and Glory* with boxes and parcels. Bill Yardley grinned as he saw the food that had been purchased for his consumption, but he frowned and bit his lip as he caught sight of the whisky.

"I'd rather 'ee hadn't fetched that drink aboard, sir," he said respectfully, as they pushed off from the quay.

"Nonsense," said Tankerlane sharply. "I must really ask you to let me eat and drink what I like. Your department is the sailing of the boat. I hope you don't think I shall take too much."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," the man replied. "It don't matter to me if you'm drunk as an owl, and I'd be the last to take the liberty of suggestin' such a thing. But my mate gets the devil in him if he has the handlin' of any liquor. He's a good chap, and a fine seaman, and he tries his hardest to keep out of temptation, he do. He knows his weakness, and we've both agreed on not keepin' liquor on board. I'm a teetotaler I am, save for a glass of port once a week on Sundays."

"I'll keep it out of his sight and reach," Tankerlane replied with a smile.

"I'd be glad if you would, sir," said Yardley, "and I hope you'll pardon the liberty I've taken in speakin' of it. But we've dirty weather in front of us, and I don't want my mate to break adrift."

It only took the fisherman five minutes to row out to the *Hope and Glory*, but in that short time Tankerlane had a foretaste of what awaited him in the creek outside. Even in the harbour the waves were big enough to break over the bow of the dinghy, and drench the occupants with water. In spite of his oilskins and the thick jersey he had bought, Tankerlane shivered as the water splashed into his face, and he was glad when they reached the smack.

She was a fine boat of twenty tons, built in Gorehaven only two years previously, and the sight of her thick timbers inspired confidence. Her mainsail, with three reefs in it, was already cracking and shivering in the wind, and her jib was bent. A young bronzed giant with dark hair and piercing black eyes was hanging over the side, and caught the nose of the dinghy with a boathook. Tankerlane glanced swiftly at his face and liked it. There was no sign of debauchery in that smooth, hard flesh, and clear eyes, and active body. But he noticed that Bill Yardley was careful to cover up the whisky with an oilskin as he took it aboard, and that he did not let it out of his hands till it was stowed away in a locker. It was only the work of a minute to cast off the moorings and get under way, and a couple of short tacks brought the *Hope and Glory* through the mouth of the harbour into the more open waters of the creek.

The wind, which was steadily increasing in fury, had now shifted into the sou'-east, and was in almost the worst possible quarter for the trip to Conasea Island. The creek itself ran three miles sou'-east, and beyond the mouth the channel ran between great sandbanks for another fifteen miles in the same direction, until the Black Spit Buoy showed the end of the Black Deep Flats. After that was reached, the course turned off at right angles, and the wind would be fair into the mouth of the Darkwater. But there would be a dead beat for the first part of the trip, against a sea that had no equal on the east coast in a sou'-easterly gale, and between the Scylla and Charybdis of two enormous sandbanks that always showed up

well in the yearly wreck chart, with the innumerable black dots which marked them from end to end.

Dr Hardy's motor-boat, which only drew two and a half feet of water, had been able to save at least twenty miles by taking a short cut across the Black Deep Flats, but the *Hope and Glory*, which drew six foot, could not risk cutting off even a small corner on a falling tide.

"We've got our work before us," said Yardley, after half an hour's beating up the creek, "and if it weren't for the money I'd turn back, I would. We ain't seed the worst of it yet. There's a deal more sea outside, and there's more wind to come from sou'-east."

Tankerlane did not answer. His face was white as a sheet, and he clung feebly to one of the stays.

"I'd go below, if I were you, sir, and lie down," said Yardley. "'Tain't no use a-standing up here and gettin' wet. You go below, where 'tis snug and warm, and have a drop of somethin' and a biscuit."

Tankerlane did not answer, but he clung more tightly to the stays, as a wave broke over the port bow and drenched him from head to foot.

"You go below at once," shouted Yardley, "or I'll have you overboard, and I ain't minded to go arter you in this sea. We'll be in open water afore long, and 'twill be rough then. This be a lake to what we'll get presently. But you say the word, sir, and we'll run back and wait till it's blown itself out."

Tankerlane looked at the speaker with gloomy eyes. He was feeling so ill that the possibility of being drowned did not alarm him. Sea-sickness, the most unromantic and ridiculed of all ailments, is in reality a cruel and terrible thing to those who suffer from it, and in its worst form is not without danger to the sufferer. Sir William Tankerlane was sorely tempted to give in to the skipper's suggestion, and he would have done so if he had not remembered what the loss of a day or two might mean to him.

"No, we will go on," he cried feebly, "if you think the boat'll stand it."

Unconsciously he had used the words of a diplomat. Nothing touches the pride of a sailor so quickly as any suggestion that his boat is unfit to go through hard weather, and many lives have been lost through this reckless vanity. Bill Yardley was proud of his boat, and he fired up at the imputation. He would far rather have been accused of cowardice.

"Stand it," he shouted angrily. "Lor' bless you, there ain't wind 'nuff in the sky, nor water 'nuff in the sea, to best the *Hope and Glory*. She'll stand it, and I and my mate'll stand it. I was thinkin' of you, sir."

"Keep at it," cried Tankerlane. "I'll go below."

"Please tell young Playle to come on deck, sir. I can't have him skulkin' down below there."

Tankerlane crawled down the hatchway into the warm and cosy cabin. A coke fire glowed in the stove, and the general appearance of warmth and dryness formed a pleasing contrast to the wet and wind-swept deck outside.

As he reached the foot of the ladder, young Joe Playle came hurriedly from the other end of the cabin. The whole place smelt strongly of alcohol, but Tankerlane was far too ill to notice details of this sort.

"You're wanted on deck," he muttered, and then collapsed on the floor, as a sudden gust of wind sent the lee rail of the smack under water.

The young giant picked him up and laid him on one of the bunks.

"A drop of sperrits'd do you good, sir," he said thickly.

"Give it me," groaned Tankerlane, turning his face to the wall of the cabin.

"With water, sir?"

"No, neat. Hurry up, that's a good chap."

In his misery Tankerlane had forgotten Yardley's warning, and for the same reason he did not notice that the man found the whisky without any inquiries about its hiding-place, nor did he see that one of the bottles was already nearly half empty.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, as he drained half a tumbler of the neat spirit. "Have a drop yourself."

The man helped himself liberally, drank it at one gulp, and then went on deck with a cigarette in his mouth.

"What be doin' down there?" asked Yardley, as he scrutinised his partner's face. "This ain't weather for idlin'." He could see that Playle had been drinking, but he had no wish to provoke a quarrel by saying anything about it. The young fellow was a nasty customer to tackle in a brawl, and his temper was none of the sweetest when he had a drop of liquor inside him.

"What be wantin'?" asked Playle.

"Just take in that jib," said Yardley, "and put up the smallest

one we've got. And when you've done that, brail up the mainsail. We've a bit more canvas than we shall be able to carry down this channel."

"'Tis wet for'ard," said Playle, looking doubtfully at a wave, which had flooded the fore part of the boat with a foot and a half of green sea.

"'Twill be wetter, if you ain't sharp."

Playle spat out a forcible oath, and made his way to the jib halliard. He performed his task with a dexterity that was truly remarkable under the circumstances. In spite of the fact that he had swallowed nearly half a bottle of whisky, and that the boat was plunging her nose every minute into a heavy sea, he never slipped nor hesitated. More than once he was up to his knees in water, and a landsman would have been swept overboard. But the young sailor seemed as steady as a rock. Yardley watched him closely, and grunted approval. He had sent him there to test his sobriety, and he was satisfied.

"Have a turn at the tiller," he said gruffly. "I want to get warm."

"Half a minute, mate. I be wet right to the middle. I'll take my turn when I've had a change. You ain't bin sea-bathin' like I have."

He went down into the cabin, changed his clothes, consumed two more stiff whiskies, and returned on deck.

Then Yardley handed him over the tiller, and, under pretence of coiling a rope, watched him narrowly. But the young man's hand was steady enough, and his head was apparently clear. He handled the boat like a yachtsman racing in smooth water, and dodged the waves with the skill of an old sailor.

"I'm goin' below," said Yardley, "and you gimme a hail when you're goin' to put her round. I'll look arter the jib sheet for you. And you be sure to give Black Spit Island a wide berth. There ain't much water within fifty yards of her now. The channel's silted up a bit on that side since last year. I 'member when I was a boy, you could sail within ten feet of her at half-ebb."

"I knows all 'bout Black Spit Island," said Playle angrily. "There ain't anythin' you can teach me 'bout Black Spit Island, Bill Yardley."

"Well, don't you cut it fine, that's all," replied the elder man, as he disappeared down the hatchway.

But young Playle had already resolved to cut it as fine as

he dared. He was not drunk, but he had taken enough to make him reckless, and the joyous spirit of fine sailing possessed him. The pleasure of a thresh to windward lies in making as much ground as possible on each tack. Many a sober man has come to grief in the mad joy of sailing too near shallow water, and it was hardly to be expected that a man, whose brain was fired with drink, would be over careful.

Black Spit Island was a small detached piece of land lying about five miles from the shore and on the very edge of the Black Deep Sands. But for the fact that it was surrounded by a strong stone wall faced with lines of wooden piles, it would have shared the fate of all the tract of country which the sea had eaten away from the mainland and buried in the sand. The highest part of the island was only ten feet above the spring tide high-water mark. It remained as a fine example of how a determined man may fight against nature.

A house once stood on the island, and nearly a hundred years ago, when the sea had almost completed its work of destruction, the owner, cut off on all sides by the sea, had sworn to keep his home from the grasp of the encroaching tides. He had done so successfully. And long after he was dead and his house had been pulled down to strengthen part of the sea wall, this little patch of land remained to bear his name. He had been one of the Black Hall folk, and for many years the place had been known as Black Island. But when the Trinity House authorities had placed a buoy on the end of the sand, some miles distant, and had named it the Black Spit Buoy, the sailors had altered the name of the island.

The *Hope and Glory* was now well in the open, and was driving into the teeth of the gale. As she plunged her nose in it, she literally ran with water from stem to stern. Her lee rail was hardly ever out of the sea, and the waves which broke over to windward sluiced along her decks in a continuous stream of foam. Tankerlane, white-faced and shivering, had crept up the ladder from the cabin, and was sitting on the combing of the hatch. The wind and spray buffeted him severely, but he would have preferred the sea itself to the warm stuffiness of the cabin.

Joe Playle was enjoying himself hugely. Clad in oilskins, sou'-wester, and sea-boots, he stood at the tiller like a black statue, glistening as the water ran from him in streams. He even disdained Yardley's assistance, when he put the boat

round. Letting go of the tiller, he loosed the jib sheet, as the smack swung round into the wind, and threw the waves from her like some black sea-monster struggling out of the deep. Then, as she came round, he made the jib sheet fast on the other side with a quick turn on the cleet, and sprang back to the tiller. Tankerlane watched him with mute wonder in his eyes, and old Yardley smoked his pipe quietly before the stove in the cabin, only too glad to find that the man whom he had suspected of being drunk was capable of handling the boat by himself.

As they neared Black Spit Island on the port tack, Playle gave a whistle of surprise. The tide had been ebbing for more than three hours, but the water was still up to the wall. As a rule there would have been nearly twenty feet of sand between the wall and the channel.

"Good," he said to himself, "'tis a big tide." And the lust of stealing a few more feet on that tack seized him body and soul.

"Hang old Bill," he muttered, "'tis a big tide, and a deal of water on the bank."

And he kept the *Hope and Glory* on the tack, till the wall was within thirty yards of her bowsprit. And Bill Yardley smoked peacefully in his cabin.

"Now," said Playle aloud, as if giving an order, "Stand by."

He loosed the tiller, and sprang for the jib sheet. But the boat did not swing round into the wind, and the next second there came a shock which sent him staggering to his knees.

Yardley brushed Tankerlane aside, and sprang out of the hatchway.

"You cursed fool," he cried, as he paid off the mainsheet, and the boom swung out with a crash. "Here, push her off at the bow with the sweeps. You, sir, get up and push, or, by Heaven, we're here for six hours." He ran for'ard, and held out the jib with both hands, in the hope that the wind might force the boat's head off the bank.

For two minutes there was a scene of stupendous physical energy. Playle pushed at the sweep till the thick wood bent like a cane, and even Tankerlane worked as though his very life depended on the result of his labour. And none of them paid any attention to the waves which poured over the black hull, breaking on it as though it were an immovable rock.

But all their efforts were in vain. The *Hope and Glory* was hard and fast on the Black Spit Island, and the ebbing tide would leave her there till it returned again.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DARKNESS

"THIS be a nice thing you'm at," cried Yardley, as he lowered the jib. "You ain't fit to sail a boat, you lubber."

"Easy, mate," said Playle. "Hard words won't get us off, and hard words lead to hard blows betimes. Just stow your talk and lend a hand with mainsail." He spoke quietly, but there was an unpleasant gleam in his dark eyes, which induced Yardley to refrain from any further abuse.

In an hour's time the water had left the *Hope and Glory* high and dry on the sandbank, and Tankerlane, after a meal consisting of a few biscuits and a glass of whisky and water, decided to go ashore and walk round the little island. The two sailors were making a splendid lunch off tongue, tinned salmon, galantine of chicken, and pate de foie gras, but the very sight of these delicacies made him feel uncomfortable, and he was anxious to feel dry land once more under his feet.

He walked along the top of the wall, picking his way carefully over the large stones, until he reached the far side of the island. Here there was nothing to be seen but a wide vista of ridged sand, stretching to the misty outline of the land. It looked firm enough—an ideal spot for children to play on—but Tankerlane remembered what Yardley had told him, and he regarded it with a mixture of awe and reverence.

"After all," he said to himself, "it is very much like life, which looks smooth enough till one steps across its surface."

Then a large dark object, entangled in the piles about a hundred yards farther on, attracted his attention. He walked towards it along the bank and scrambled over the slippery timbers till he reached it. Then he saw that it was part of a boat, terribly mangled by the force with which it had been cast up on the breakwater. It was literally impaled on one of the piles.

"H'm," he said to himself, "that can't have been there long, or it'd have broken up."

He examined the little wreck with interest, and then continued his walk along the bank. Before he had gone more than a hundred yards, however, he heard a faint moan. It seemed to come from some tall reeds that fringed a small pool about fifty feet from the wall.

He stooped down and made his way to the place. As he brushed the reeds aside, he caught sight of the body of a man, lying face downwards, and with one hand in the water of the pool.

He knelt down, and, lifting the body from the ground, looked at the face. The eyes blinked and stared at him, but there was no sign of recognition in them, though it was the face of one who knew him well enough—the face of John Shil.

Tankerlane looked for one moment into the face of his enemy, and then let the body slip back on to its bed of reeds. The eyes had stared into his own, and yet had not seen him; the lips had moved as if to speak, but no words had come from them. The white face was disfigured with a ghastly cut across the forehead. The clothes were so wet that the water dripped from them as the body was lifted from the ground.

A feeble moan broke from the man's lips, but Tankerlane did not speak, or run for assistance. There was no smile of triumph on his face, but his heart was glad. Here, at his feet, lay the great John Shil, weaker, for all his strength, than a child. Here, delivered into his hands, was the man who had taken from him all the joy and happiness of life. It did not need the hand of a murderer to kill him. Another twenty-four hours by the edge of the pool would do the work. Already it was clear that exhaustion, hunger, thirst, and cold, had reduced the man's vitality to the lowest ebb. Food, warmth, and stimulants, administered at once, would save his life. If they were withheld, he would die. It was easy enough to withhold them.

Sir William Tankerlane's face grew hard and grim as he listened to the devil that whispered in his ear. "After all," he said to himself, "it is but justice that this man should die. He is a murderer, and the law requires his life. It would be more merciful to let him die like this. It will only be a quiet sinking into oblivion. The struggle for life is over."

And then he pictured to himself the future. His wife would

return to him ; temptation would be removed from her path. In time, perhaps, he might even win her love, or at any rate the affection of a wife for the man who loves her.

He walked away from the reeds which fringed the pool, and, standing on the top of the bank, looked towards the smack, which had heeled over on the sand. A man was walking towards him along the top of the wall. He recognised Joe Playle, from the height of the man's great frame. He knew that he would have to decide quickly. If John Shil was to be left to die, Playle would have to be met and turned back before he reached the broken boat on the shore.

Sir William Tankerlane moved a few steps along the bank, and then he paused. His whole nature revolted against the thing that he had almost resolved to do. Yet his love for Laura was the ruling passion of his life, and better men than William Tankerlane have committed greater crimes in the name of love. By a curious irony of fate he was placed in much the same position as John Shil had been placed, when Ben Holland clung to the edge of the quarry and cried for help. He had but to stretch out his hand to save the life of his enemy. But with John Shil it had been the matter of seconds, following close on a physical encounter where the blood had run like fire, and the mind was dimmed with the fury of battle. Here, it was a deed to be done in cold blood—the climax of long months of hatred, an act of justice to the man who had robbed him, and whose life was forfeit to the law.

It will perhaps stand to William Tankerlane's credit on the Day of Judgment that he paused after those few steps, and hesitated to leave his enemy to die. But at any rate it was the means of saving John Shil's life. For, before Tankerlane had decided whether it would be better to burden his conscience with a great crime, or to lose the woman he loved, the keen eyes of the sailor had detected the fragment of the boat on the breakwater.

Tankerlane remained where he was, and watched Playle examine the wreckage. It was too late to divert the man's attention from John Shil. The sailor's mind would at once turn from a wrecked boat to the body of the man who had sailed it, whether dead or alive. He would search all the shore of the island. He would pass the spot where Shil lay by the pool. It was certain that he would hear a moan, or

notice the crushed and broken reeds. Tankerlane at once resolved to forestall the discovery, and appear in as favourable a light as possible. He advanced to meet Joe Playle, who was glancing at the shore and marshland on every side of him.

"Some poor devil druv' ashore," said Playle, as they met. "Boat ain't bin there long, I reckon. Shouldn't wonder if his body ain't about. Tide sets on here wonderful. He'm dead, I guess, though mebbe he's crawled ashore."

"I've found him," Tankerlane replied quietly. "He's just alive. I was coming to you for help. We must carry him back to the *Hope and Glory*."

Playle followed him down to the reeds by the pool, and picked up Shil's body in his strong arms.

"He'm a big, fine man," he said, as he struggled to the top of the bank with his load. "Yet I reckon he found the sea too much for his strength. That's an ugly cut on his face. Got thrown on one of them piles, I reckon."

Tankerlane suggested that the load was too much for one man, but Playle, who was proud of his great strength, refused all offers of assistance, and carried John Shil in his arms all the way back to the boat.

When the limp and motionless body was taken down into the cabin and laid on one of the bunks, the three men set to work to restore life to the exhausted frame.

"He'm hurt cruel," said Yardley, as he placed some soup on the stove, "but 'tain't that has done him up. 'Tis want of food and water. I reckon 'twas water he wanted when he crawled down to that pool. Did 'ee say his eyes were open, sir, and that he cried out?"

"Yes," Tankerlane replied, "his eyes were certainly open, and it was his moaning that attracted me to the spot where I found him. But I expect he has fainted from exhaustion, and that he'll be all right when he's had something to eat and drink."

"'Tis an ugly cut," said Playle, looking at the dark, jagged tear across the forehead. "I wonder who he be."

"Look in pockets," said Yardley. "Mebbe he'll have a letter or summat as'll 'dentify him."

Playle pulled out a small handful of papers from Shil's trouser pocket and looked at the address on an envelope. Tankerlane smiled as he saw the handwriting of Leonore.

"Gosh, Bill," said Playle, as he read the name, "this be a great day for us. 'Tis Mr John Shil, of Black Hall, and 'tis his own land we've found him on. Hadn't we better go back to Gore'ven for doctor?"

"No," said Tankerlane abruptly, "Mr Shil won't want a doctor, if you'll only get him out of this faint. Force his mouth open, and put some spirit down his throat."

"His jaws shut powerful tight," said Playle, as he tried to force the teeth apart. "'Tis a grim, awful look on his face, too, as though he were lookin' at death."

At last, however, they succeeded in forcing the mouth open, and Yardley poured a mixture of oxtail soup and whisky down the throat, and in a few minutes John Shil opened his eyes and stared round the cabin.

"Water," he murmured faintly, "water."

He drank the weak mixture of whisky and water which was placed to his lips, and then closed his eyes with a sigh.

"Be you better, sir?" asked Yardley.

"Yes," Shil answered slowly, "I'm better. I shall be all right when I've had a rest and food. Oh Heaven, it was a fight for life."

"I'll lay it was," said Playle. "I reckon any man as got adrift in that little punt of your'n would have to fight for it las' night. Here, sir, you drink this soup; 'tis hot and good, and though it be tinned stuff, 'twill put a bit of life into you."

"Where is it?" asked Shil, stretching out his hand, and staring round the cabin.

Tankerlane and Yardley looked at each other, but the latter put the mug of soup into the outstretched hand, and Shil drank it greedily.

"Where am I?" he muttered, "and who are you chaps?"

"You be in the cabin of the *Hope and Glory*, sir, twenty-ton smack from Gore'ven. We've just picked you up on the Black Spit Island. S'pose you drifted hard on the wall?"

"Very hard."

"But you'm in good hands now, sir, and you'll be as right as rain arter a bit of rest. You'll be wantin' to go back to Gore'ven, mebbe?"

"No, I want to go to Conasea."

"'Tis the place we're makin' for," said Yardley, "ain't it, sir?" and he turned to Sir William Tankerlane, who was standing in the shadow by the hatchway. But the baronet

did not answer. He was wondering why Shil had not recognised him.

"We're makin' for Con'sea now, sir," continued Yardley, "only we happened to pick up a bit of Black Spit Island. 'Twas my mate as did it. I cursed him right 'nuff at the time, but I reckon as some Greater Skipper'n me told him to take the bank so fine. Else we'd have bin at Black Spit Buoy by now, and you'd have bin in them reeds still."

"What's the time?" asked Shil, turning over on his side, and staring at the opposite side of the cabin.

"Bout twelve o'clock, sir," Yardley replied.

"Midnight?" said Shil faintly. "My good man, it is impossible. I didn't leave Black Hall till after nine o'clock. It must be nearer morning."

"Nearer morning?" queried Playle. "Why, sir"—but a fierce look from Yardley silenced him.

"Mebbe my watch is wrong, sir," he continued, "and we've lost all count of time these last few hours. We've had other things to think of."

"It must be nearly morning," murmured Shil. "Why is your cabin so dark?"

The three men looked at each other and understood. For a few moments no one dared to speak. Even Tankerlane, whose hatred for John Shil was the fierce passion of his life, was afraid to speak. For the daylight streamed down through the open hatchway of the cabin, and it was light enough to read a newspaper.

"Yes, sir," said Yardley in a harsh voice, "our can of oil's got washer' overboard. 'Tis powerful dark, as you say, sir. But 'twill be dawn soon. I reckon my old watch must have stopped when that big wave caught me up to the middle. Sure, 'twill be dawn soon. But you just lie down and rest, sir, and don't you worry 'bout daylight or lamps or sichlike things. You be with friends, sir, and we'll take you to Con'sea Island, when we get afloat, ay, even if it blow like hell."

"It is a very dark night," said Shil.

"Ay, sir," said Yardley, "'tis a cruel dark night."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE TOLL OF THE SEA

"Who's goin' to face this job?" asked Yardley. "Who's goin' to tell him?"

Neither Playle nor Tankerlane answered the question. The men were on deck, and they all three stared at the sea, which had once more returned to the boat, in a thin sheet of bubbling foam that splashed against the keel.

"'Tis in reason that he must be told," continued Yardley. "'Tain't likely we can make it out to be night much longer. He'll be suspectin' summat, if he don't suspect already."

"'Twas a thin game," growled Playle. "'Twasn't likely as we hadn't a drop of oil, nor a match, nor a candle; 'tweren't likely we'd be sailin' without lights in weather like this. I bet he knows."

"Well, he'm sleepin' sound 'nuff on it," said Yardley. "He'll be right 'nuff when he wakes, 'cept for the darkness. Strong as a horse he be, and food and sleep do a lot for a man as is done up. But what I say is, he'd better be told when he is awakened."

"Mr Shil wishes to go to Con'sea," growled Playle. "You heard him say so."

"Mebbe he'll alter his mind when he knows what's come to him."

"Perhaps he will still wish to go there," said Tankerlane sternly, "but, in any case, if you don't take me on to Conasea, I shall not pay you a farthing."

"We'll go to Con'sea," said Playle roughly. "I'll see to that."

"And who be you?" asked Yardley, turning round on his partner with a scowl, "who be you, young Playle, to be givin' orders?"

"I'm partner in this ship."

"Yes, 'tis true you have your little bit of money in her, but more'n half of her 'longs to me ; forty sixty-fourths is my share, Joe Playle, and I'm registered as her master, I am, and I give orders, not you."

"That'll do," interrupted Tankerlane, as he saw the dangerous light in Playle's dark eyes. "I don't care who's master of this ship, but I'm the man that's going to draw the cheque, and not a farthing do either of you get if you don't have a try to reach Conasea Island. That's my last word on the matter."

"Mr Shil has money, too," retorted Yardley ; "a heap of money, if report be true, and he'll pay handsome for us to carry out his orders. Don't you be afraid, mate, as we'll lose by goin' back to Gor'ven, if Mr Shil wishes it."

"Mr Shil won't wish it," said Tankerlane quietly. "I'll go down and have a talk with him."

"Don't you wake him," said Yardley. "Sleep's life to him just now."

"I won't wake him till we're afloat," Tankerlane replied, "and then the matter must be settled. I won't wake him then, if you'll agree to go to Conasea."

"We'll go ahead," said Yardley sullenly, "but if he wakes, and want to turn back, arter he knows, you understand, why then we'll turn back."

Tankerlane smiled, and thrust his hand into the pocket of his coat. Then he turned on his heel and made his way down into the cabin.

For half an hour he sat there in silence and looked at the face of the sleeping man. The gash across the temple had been bathed and bandaged, and the features were calm and peaceful.

Then Tankerlane, impatient of the delay, placed his hand on John Shil's shoulder. To do him justice, he had no particular relish for the task that lay before him, and he wished to get it over as soon as possible.

As he shook the sleeper gently, John Shil opened his eyes and looked at him.

"Feel better, sir?" said Tankerlane, imitating as far as he was able the rough voice and accent of a fisherman.

"Much better," Shil murmured sleepily. "Is it still dark?"

"Ay, sir, 'tis still dark."

"Who are you? I seem to know your voice."

"Doubt if you've ever heard it afore, sir. I be part owner of the *Hope and Glory*."

"How many hours to daylight?" asked Shil. "I'm tired of this infernal darkness."

"I'll strike a light, sir," said Tankerlane. He wanted to put an end to this ghastly farce, and he also wished to avoid detection by speaking as little as possible. He went through the process of striking a match.

"Try again," said Shil, with a feeble smile. "I reckon they're damp."

"'Tis lit, sure 'nuff," said Tankerlane, holding up the blazing match, which seemed a mere ghost of a flame in the daylight.

"Lit?" queried Shil angrily, as he stared at Tankerlane with wide-open eyes. "Don't be a fool, man. 'Tis dark as night."

"Match be lit, sir!"

"'Tis dark," cried Shil. "I can't see. What's happened? Oh Heaven, I understand!"

He buried his face in his hands, and lay very still.

"Somethin's wrong with your sight, sir," said Tankerlane, after a long pause. "Mebbe we'd better go back to Gor'ven and take 'ee to a doctor."

"No," said Shil, in a low voice. "Take me on to Conasea, to Dowsett's farm, at once, directly we're afloat."

"You'd better go back to Gor'ven," said Tankerlane with a smile.

"No, damn you," cried Shil. "Take me on to Conasea. I'll give you a hundred pounds if you'll get me to Conasea within the next six hours."

"I'll ask my mate," said Tankerlane. "Mebbe we can do it."

"Mr Shil will give you a hundred pounds if you'll get him to Conasea within the next six hours," said Tankerlane as he returned to the two men on deck, "and as I am going to give you fifty, you'll do well enough over this trip."

"Does he know?" asked Yardley, with a suspicious glance at Tankerlane's face.

"Yes, he knows, poor chap."

"And he took it well, did he?"

"Yes," said Tankerlane, "he took it well. I suggested that we should return to Gorehaven and get a doctor. But he

wouldn't listen to me. He insisted on being taken to Conasea—to Dowsett's farm, whoever Dowsett may be—and he's offered you a hundred pounds if you'll get him there in six hours."

"I'd like to hear that offer repeated," said Yardley bluntly.

Tankerlane flushed, but he kept control of his temper.

"Go down and see him yourself," he replied quietly. "I passed myself off as part owner of the boat when I made the bargain. I must ask you to continue this innocent piece of deception. If he asks you anything about me, which I don't suppose he will, you can tell him my name, William Transom, but I wish him to believe that I am part owner of the boat."

Bill Yardley frowned. "I'm a plain-speakin' man," he said, "but I don't mean no offence, sir, when I ask what game you're up to. I like dealin' straight with folk, so as I can know where I be all the time. 'Tis odd both you two gents should be wantin' to go to Con'sea, when no one lives out there but old Sam Dowsett. I doubt if a gent has landed there this twenty year and more."

"If I were you," replied Tankerlane, "I should mind my own business, and earn the money that's been offered you. Neither my affairs nor the affairs of Mr Shil concern you. But you can take it from me that you won't get my money unless you carry out my orders, and I order you to tell Mr Shil that I am a sailor like yourself and part owner of the *Hope and Glory*. I don't suppose he'll ask about me. He's enough else to think of, poor chap. But if he does ask, you'll know what answer to give him."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Yardley. "I forgot myself, so to speak."

But in spite of his apology, Yardley went down and ascertained John Shil's wishes for himself. The blind man inquired after his previous visitor, and learning that his name was William Transom, and part owner of the smack, gave no further thought to the matter. He had, as Tankerlane had suggested, enough already to think of in his darkness.

Indeed, it seemed to John Shil, as he lay there on the hard bunk, and stared into the night, that God had at last brought him down to the lowest depths of misery. He recalled his desperate struggle for life, when the punt had lurched away from under his feet and the waters had closed over his head.

He remembered how he had risen to the surface and battled with the waves till he reached the capsized boat ; how he had clung to it, and tried to push it shorewards ; how he had been afraid to leave it, and swim towards the smooth bank of mud barely two hundred yards away, knowing well enough that the water was less treacherous than the slime ; how the wind and tide had swept him seawards ; and how even the dog had left him at last, preferring, in spite of popular tradition, his own safety to death in the company of his master.

And then had come the long hours of wind and storm-swept sea and darkness, and the grim struggle for life, which only hung on the strength of a man's muscles and the endurance of his body. And then the cold and the hunger, and the thirst and the crashing fury of the elements ; and then the roar of surf on a shore, the splintering of wood, the cruel blow across the face, and the final clinging to the firm timber of some breakwater, and the sucking back of the sea, and the forward rush of the wave, beating out his life on the palisade of wood and stone. And then oblivion, and the half waking in a night, wherein he cried for water, and crawled landwards seeking it.

All this he remembered, and he recalled the great joy of knowing that he was saved, and that some fishermen had restored him to life, and that he was to be taken to Conasea Island. And now he knew that all the battle had been in vain, and that the life which had been given back to him was barely worth taking. What use has the world for those who cannot see ? What love can a woman feel for the man who cannot look upon her face ? For such there is pity, but no love.

" 'Tis the judgment of God," he muttered to himself, as he turned over and faced another wall of darkness. "I would have sinned, and she would have sinned for love of me. I would have broken my word and the heart of a good woman. All this I would have done. But God has intervened. Perhaps she is dead, but whether she be alive or dead, I shall never see her face again."

He cried out in his darkness, and Yardley came lumbering down the ladder.

"When can we get off?" he exclaimed. "I must be at Conasea in six hours' time."

"We'll get off in 'bout ten minutes, sir. She'm shiftin' in

the sand now. But 'twill be a job, I can tell 'ee, sir. 'Gainst wind and tide it be now. And 'twill be dark in an hour."

"Dark," echoed Shil faintly. "Oh yes, of course it will be dark."

"Can I get 'ee anythin', sir, or do anythin'?"

"Nothing, thank you, except get me to Dowsett's farm on Conasea."

Yardley returned to his partner on the deck. The smack was already lifting with the tide, and the water was breaking over her bows.

"'Tis blowin' worse'n ever," said Playle, "and tide's runnin' hard against us."

"'Twill have to blow worse'n this afore we lose a hundred and fifty poun', mate."

"Is it all that?" ejaculated Playle. "Gosh, we'd go through hell for that. S'pose we'll get off on starboard tack."

"I est we do, we don't get off at all," said Yardley. "We'll have sea room when we've pulled her over the anchor."

For several minutes the two men strained and laboured at the winch, and slowly moved the heavy boat away from the shore until she lay over the anchor, which they had carried out thirty fathoms seawards.

A long and hard fight lay before them. They were still seven miles from the Black Spit Buoy, and every inch of that distance would have to be fought for. It was no mere beating against a head wind, but a battle with the tide, which poured up the channel like a mill race. With a smooth sea and a moderate breeze the smack would have made light of the job, but the heavy buffeting of the waves, and the constant luffing, as the violent bursts of wind almost flattened her down on the water, took a lot of way off her, and she made a bare fifty yards each time she crossed the creek from side to side.

Half an hour of this contest with the wind and waves proved enough for Sir William Tankerlane, and he once more collapsed in the violent throes of sickness. He refused to go down into the cabin, where he might have to talk to John Shil, and his illness would give the lie to his assumption of a calling for which he was by no means suited. He crawled to the foot of the mast, and lay for'ard, with his arms round it, and the waves drenching him from head to foot, as they broke over the bows.

"Wonder whether he'm enjoyin' it?" said Playle with a grin. "Mebbe, he'm wishin' himself back on the land."

"I don't like the look oft myself," Yardley replied. "I'd give ten poun' to be round the Black Spit, and sailin' easy up the Darkwater, with wind and tide behind us."

"We're creepin' up. We ain't goin' backwards."

"Ay, and 'twill be dark in less'n an hour. There's a beauty for you."

A big wave had curled over the bow of the boat, hidden Tankerlane from sight in a cloud of foam, and swirled aft in a torrent that buried Playle's boots to the ankles. When it had passed, Tankerlane was huddled a little closer to the mast.

"'Tain't safe for him there," said Yardley. "You go for'ard and get him below. Then we'll have the hatches on. 'Tain't good 'nuff havin' these folk on deck."

Playle made his way for'ard to Tankerlane, who, in spite of his oilskins, was as wet as though he had fallen into the sea.

"You get below," he shouted. "'Tain't no place for you, sir; you'll get swept overboard, and God knows who'll go arter you in this sea. You come along now."

Tankerlane did not move, but clung to the mast, as a drowning man clings to a spar. Playle stooped down and wrenched his hands apart by sheer force. Then he lifted him up in his arms and dragged him along the deck.

"You get down there, sir," he said, as he reached the hatchway. "You'll pardon my rough ways, but we can't have you overboard."

Tankerlane, limp and almost lifeless, was lowered into the cabin. Playle followed him, and, picking him up from the floor, laid him on the bunk opposite to John Shil. Then the sailor found the whisky bottle, and, pouring out half a tumbler of raw spirit, forced it down Tankerlane's throat.

"'Twill keep the cold out," he said, and at once proceeded to fortify himself in the same manner.

For three hours Yardley remained at the tiller, and then at last the tiny flash of the Black Spit gas buoy showed through the curtain of spray.

Yet the last half-hour was destined to try the helmsman's nerve and skill to the utmost. On no place along the east coast of Essex does the tide pour with such fury as on the extreme edge of the Black Deep Sands. Even in fair weather the water runs against them like a mill race, and in a south-easterly gale the sea is a veritable maelstrom of cross currents and short steep waves. So terrible is the force of the water at

this point that the buoy is placed a quarter of a mile from the edge of the sands, so as to leave a wide margin for strangers, who might easily miscalculate the strength of the tide. A quarter of a mile of deep water lay inside the tiny twinkling light, but even that was none too much, and never a year passed without a dozen wrecks, and a heavy toll of human lives.

"'Tis hell," shouted Yardley. "Three times she's missed stays in last hour. If it weren't for the money, I'd turn tail now."

"You go on," yelled Playle, "'tain't more'n half mile. You lemme have the tiller. I've had 'nuff of this."

"When we're—round—buoy," Yardley spluttered, as a shower of water drove into his mouth and eyes. He was determined to stick to his post till the smack had weathered the buoy. A clear head was wanted to steer the boat against that wind and tide. Where every inch had to be fought for, the course had to be sailed by brain work as well as by physical strength. A sail too full or not full enough meant all the difference between success or failure. Yardley had long ceased to luff the boat, as she heeled over to the blast. He kept her at it, with her lee rail never out of the sea. But he dared not trust the work to Joe Playle, who was already half drunk, and who had more than once bungled the mechanical work that he had to do, when the boat was put round at the edges of the channel.

"Lemme have tiller," repeated Playle, crawling on his hands and knees across the deck. Yardley lifted his foot, as though to kick the man in the face. The heavy leather boot, shod with iron nails, was a nasty weapon, and Playle stopped.

"You get back," shouted Yardley; "you'll have your turn later on. But you don't touch this tiller till we're round the buoy."

Playle broke into a torrent of foul oaths, until a flood of foaming water choked the words, and carried him along the deck to Yardley's feet.

"You'd best get below," said Yardley; "I'll cast off this safety tackle and handle the jib sheets myself. You'll be overboard afore you knows where you are."

Playle, clinging to the rope at Yardley's waist with one hand, raised himself from the deck, and gripped his comrade by the arm.

"I've mind to make 'ee leave the tiller," he muttered hoarsely.

"'Tis my turn, and there ain't a better man than I in Gor'ven."

"Look here, Joe," said Yardley quietly, "if you want this tiller, you'll have to chuck me overboard."

"I've a mind to, I've a good mind to."

"Then you may as well chuck yourself as well, for the *Hope and Glory* will be matchwood in ten minutes."

"I'll wait," growled Playle. "I ain't one to hurt a pal. Get round your buoy, and then I'll take 'ee up the Darkwater in fine style."

"Stand by," yelled Yardley, as he put the boat round, into an inferno of white foam.

Playle sprang to the sheets, and did his work.

"We'll do it this time, Joe," said Yardley, as they went plunging off on the port tack. "We'll weather her this time," and he glanced at the Black Spit Light, which twinkled well to leeward.

Ten minutes later the *Hope and Glory* tore past the buoy, with just four feet to spare.

"Goin' to gybe?" shouted Playle.

"No," was the sharp reply, and Yardley winded the boat, as the safer method of altering his course.

Then he handed over the tiller to Playle. The boat was now running before the wind and tide, and sailing almost in the opposite direction to her previous course. She rose and fell on the following seas with a surge and roar. 'Twas easy enough work for a seaman with all his wits about him. Yardley, cold, hungry, and drenched to the skin, made his way to the main hatch.

"Keep her west-nor'-west," he said, "and don't 'ee keep her dead before the wind, or—God in Heaven!"

Before he could move or say another word, Playle's uncertain hand had gybed the boat. The wind backed against the mainsail and the great boom swung clean across the deck.

The next moment there was a crash of splintering wood and a downward rush of spar and rope and canvas. The mast had stood, but the gaff had snapped in two, and the halliards had parted, and the mainsail was in the water.

And there was no one left on the deck of the *Hope and Glory*.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE JOURNEY'S END

THE crash of the falling spars echoed through the cabin of the *Hope and Glory* like a peal of thunder. Even Tankerlane, half-dead with sickness, and caring little whether he lived or died, was roused from his apathy, and, crawling from his bunk along the floor, he gripped the ladder and pulled himself to his feet.

"What has happened?" cried Shil, who knew something about the things that can happen to a boat. "Has the mast gone? We've carried away something, and the boat has stopped. I can't hear the water along her planks. What has happened?"

He sat up in his bunk and stared into his world of darkness. There was a look of fear on his face. He had but just come from the grip of the sea, and he was afraid of it. He knew the terrors of the water, and the last thing he had seen on earth was the fury and the force of it.

"You just lie still, sir," muttered Tankerlane, still keeping up his role of a sailor. "You be safe as houses. I'll have a look on deck, and see what old Bill's a-doin' of."

He made his way up the ladder with difficulty, for the smack was rolling heavily from side to side, and, after a hard struggle, succeeded in forcing off the hatch.

"Yardley," he cried, as he thrust his head out into the open air, "what's happened? What was that noise?"

There was no reply to his question. But there was the sound of canvas cracking in the wind, and the hiss of waves as they sluiced past the boat in white lines of foam. A spar thumped heavily to and fro against the deck.

"Playle," he shouted, now thoroughly frightened, "Playle, Yardley, where are you? What has happened?"

There was no answer to his cry but the swish of the waves

and the thud of the broken spar. It was pitch dark save for the tiny lamp which shed its light on the compass, and the red and green rays which fell from the side lamps on the white foam ahead. He crawled on to the deck and made his way to the tiller. The stout piece of ash was rocking to and fro, as the sea beat against the rudder.

"Playle! Yardley!" he shrieked, "where are you? Oh Heaven, what has happened?"

He clung to the tiller, and, looking over the stern, saw the twinkle of the Black Spit Buoy. Far ahead, in the distance, he saw other lights, and one, though he knew it not, was streaming from the window of Dowsett's cottage. He noticed that both wind and sea were behind him, and, recalling the scraps of conversation he had heard, he guessed that the boat had rounded the Black Spit, and was now in the Darkwater. He remembered how Yardley had reckoned the trip to the buoy as the only serious part of the voyage. After that it was to be plain sailing, mere child's play—and yet—where were the two men? Had they deserted him? Had they been swept overboard? Either alternative seemed impossible. They had yet to be paid for their work; and how could they be swept overboard when it was all plain sailing?

Tankerlane was no coward, but the situation was well calculated to strike terror into the heart of a man who knew nothing whatever about sailing. The darkness, the fury of the wind, the violence of the sea, and the knowledge that he and John Shil were the only two men left on the smack, made a combination of difficulties that the bravest man might well fear to contemplate.

But Sir William Tankerlane, in that hour of fear and peril, proved himself worthy of the great name that he bore. He realised that John Shil was blind and helpless, and that the task of saving both their lives rested entirely on his own shoulders. He was ignorant of everything connected with a boat; he did not even know where he was, or where he had to make for; he was half-dead with sickness, and could hardly stand. He did not know what had happened to the boat, or why Playle and Yardley had disappeared. And all round him the wind and sea roared through the darkness, and the smack lurched to and fro like a drunken man.

Yet he knew that he must act, and try to bring the *Hope and Glory* to Conasea Island.

He let go the tiller, and, stumbling across the deck, crawled

down into the cabin, and unhooked the lamp which hung from the ceiling.

"What's up?" cried Shil, as he heard the sound of his entry.

"It be all right, sir," Tankerlane replied. "Just you lie still. There ain't nothing to be afeared of. We'm in Darkwater now, with wind and tide behind us."

He made his way back to the deck, and examined it by the light of the lantern. He saw the wreck of the mainsail, and though he did not understand what had happened, he realised that it had some connection with the disappearance of Playle and Yardley.

"Swept overboard," he muttered to himself. "What can I do? What can I do? Perhaps they're still struggling for life in that sea." He went aft and pulled on the painter of the dinghy. Then, as the boat came close up to the smack, he remembered that he could not row, and that, if he left the smack, he would probably never be able to get back to it.

"Playle! Playle! Yardley! Yardley!" he shrieked, leaning over the edge of the smack, and crying into the roar of the waters. Then he stumbled for'ard with the lantern, clinging on to anything that came within his reach. He saw that the jib was bellying out before the wind, and he presumed that it was moving the boat along. But as he looked at it the canvas flapped and then filled on the other side, and the smack began to turn round.

"I must try and steer her," he said to himself, and he went aft to the tiller. Just as he reached it a huge wave broke over the stern and poured along the deck. Gallons of water found their way into the cabin through the open hatch, and John Shil, not knowing what had happened, cried out to be led up on deck.

"You'm all right, sir," said Tankerlane; "I'll put cover on hatch. You'm safe as in your own house. We'll be at Con'sea in half an hour."

He put on the cover of the hatch, and took his place at the tiller. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he tried to keep the Black Spit Buoy behind him. He had an idea that he was taking a straight course up the Darkwater, but, as a matter of fact, he was going from side to side, and even, at times, round and round in a circle. He knew nothing of steering, save that if he moved the tiller one way the boat went the other.

But in the darkness he could not even perform the simple task of keeping the boat on a straight course. He knew

nothing of the coast, and, for aught he knew to the contrary, it might be surrounded with dangerous rocks. The sea roared past him in long steep breakers, and every now and then the smack, weighed down with the wreck of her mainsail, refused to rise to the wave, and a torrent of water swept her from her stern to her bowsprit.

Then suddenly there came a jerk which sent his feet from under him, and the next moment the tiller swung itself out of his grasp, and he fell on to the deck. Before he could rise, a big wave broke over the stern and washed him up to the mast.

For a moment he clung to the thick wooden pole in a frenzy of despair and thought that his last hour had come. Then as the water drained away from the deck he rose to his feet and gripped the jib halliard. As he did so, there was a loud thud which vibrated through every timber of the vessel, and it was followed by another. Even Tankerlane, ignorant as he was of things appertaining to the sea, realised that the *Hope and Glory* was aground.

"Thank God," he said to himself, "there'll be a little peace now." He did not realise that the tide was rising and would float him off again.

He carefully crept along the deck, and, unfastening the hatch, made his way down into the cabin. There was an inch of water on the floor, but the bunks were dry and comfortable. He hung up the lantern on a hook, and splashed across the floor-boards till he reached the whisky. The bottle was empty, and he had to open another. That empty bottle was the cause of a tragedy which had given two more lives to the sea.

"What's happened?" asked Shil feebly, as the boat crashed and bumped on the hard sand, and the noise of the impact was like thunder in his ears. "Where are we? Are you Yardley? If not, tell Yardley to come down at once."

Tankerlane did not answer, but poured himself out a stiff glass of whisky and water and drained the glass to the last drop. He had resolved to put an end to the farce he had been acting, and let Shil know exactly what had happened.

"Why can't you answer?" said Shil. "What's happened? Remember I am blind, and can't see a thing. I am helpless in your hands."

"'Tis the judgment of God," said Tankerlane, speaking in his natural voice. "It is your own sin that has brought you to this, John Shil."

"Who are you?" cried Shil, trying to rise to his feet and falling back in his weakness. "What has happened? Where is Yardley? Who are you, damn you—can't you speak? I know your voice."

"It seems you do not," Tankerlane replied. "But I will enlighten you. I am William Tankerlane."

"Tankerlane," he cried harshly. "Here, Playle! Yardley! where are you? Why can't you answer? Why don't you come? Playle! Yardley!"

"It is no good calling to them," said Tankerlane quietly. "They have been washed overboard. You and I are the only two men on this vessel."

"Transom? where is he? What has happened to him?"

"I am Transom," Tankerlane replied.

"You?—oh, I see; a very pretty little piece of acting. I congratulate you. What's your game, Tankerlane?"

"I chartered this boat to take me to Conasea Island. You are my guest—my honoured, if unwelcome guest."

"I'm afraid I'm rather at your mercy," said Shil, "but don't imagine that I shan't make a fight for it."

"My dear Shil," Tankerlane replied with a laugh, "I have no intention of coming to blows with you. You have been punished enough already. But perhaps you would like to know that you owe your life to me. I was alone on Black Spit Island when I found you in the reeds. It would have been easy enough for me to have returned to the boat and said nothing about it. You would have been dead by now."

Shil did not reply. He did not believe Tankerlane's statement; but, even if he had done so, he felt but little gratitude to the man who had rescued him from death.

"I hope you realise," continued Tankerlane, "that if I had wished to get rid of you, I could have done so by merely withholding my assistance. Once, if I remember right, a man called out to you to save him from death, and you withheld the hand that would have saved him. In my case there was not even a cry for help. I had but to turn on my heel and walk away."

"What do you want of me?" asked Shil, who began to see that Tankerlane had some object in reminding him of this debt of gratitude.

"I want to impress on you that for the time being there must be a truce between us. We are, if you will excuse the pleasantry, in the same boat. Her big sail has come to grief, and

gone over the side. She is at present bumping on a sandbank which seems to be as hard as a rock. Now I know nothing whatever about boats, or sailing, and you, I believe, know a little. If you will tell me what to do, I'll do it. 'Twill be time enough for you and I to fight, when we've got safe to land."

"Where's the wind?"

"Right behind us."

"Is the jib set?"

"Yes, if you mean the little sail in the front."

"Well, take it down. It's only driving us farther on the bank. You'll find the halliard—the rope that hoists it up—at the foot of the mast. We'd better drop anchor till daylight, and wait for help."

"No," replied Tankerlane firmly. "We must try to get off this bank and get to Conasea to-night. Wind and tide are both behind us."

"Very well," said Shil, "we must wait till we drive over the bank. She's a strong boat if she'll stand much more of this bumping. But aren't you afraid to take me with you to Conasea?"

"No," replied Tankerlane, with a grim smile. "I am not afraid."

"Well, get up on deck and try to fix the position of all the lights you can see. Then come down and tell me, and I'll try to direct you on the proper course. It's pitch dark, I suppose?"

"Yes, pitch dark." But when Tankerlane had taken off the hatch and crawled out on deck he was agreeably surprised to find that the moon was shining brightly in a clear sky, and that he could see the outline of the land on either side of him. The wind, however, was blowing with the same fury, and even as he reached the tiller, and clung to it for support, a big wave broke over the stern of the smack, and nearly swept him off his feet.

Still clinging to the tiller, which, owing to the fact that the rudder was jammed in the sand, was a firm support for his tired and feeble body, he looked aft in the hope of seeing some sign of Playle or Yardley, and he even called out to them again by name. But there was no reply save the crash of the vessel on the hard sand and the flapping of the sails. Then suddenly the bumping ceased and the boat swept forward on the crest of a wave like a hound slipped from the leash. Tankerlane let go the tiller and sprawled down over the hatchway.

"She's afloat," he cried, "and the moon's shining. Just come up and have a look—oh, I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Get the lie of the land," answered Shil from the cabin, "and tell me where we are."

Tankerlane's inexperienced eye tried to grasp all the details of the black fringe on either side of the foaming sea. Then he explained the situation to John Shil. The latter, who had only a superficial knowledge of the estuary, gave directions which were short and simple, but extremely hard to carry out.

"Keep her on that last light to starboard—on your right, that is."

But, try as he would, Tankerlane could not keep the vessel on the light. She tore wildly to one side of the creek, and then, without warning, dashed back to the other, and would have made no ground at all if it had not been for the tide, which forced her slowly and steadily onwards. Small wonder that Sam Dowsett, who was watching from the window of his cottage, compared her to a drunken man.

But nearer the light came, and still nearer, and Tankerlane stuck to his task like a man of nerve and courage. More than once he nearly hit the bank on either side, and only good fortune saved him, for he had discovered that his efforts at the tiller were almost useless, and that, if she did not choose to turn of her own free will, nothing could alter her course.

At last the light from the cottage was only a quarter of a mile from the boat, and Tankerlane saw with pleasure that beyond the cottage itself there lay a smooth, quiet lake—a veritable haven after the fury of the waves. In his confusion he did not pause to consider the improbability of a cottage being set in the middle of the water, and in the uncertain light he could not see that the water itself poured down into the lake from a higher level.

Then someone opened the window, and yelled to him, and the next instant he saw the danger, and tried to turn the vessel from her mad career. But she seemed to have taken the bit into her teeth, and, in spite of all his efforts, she hardly swung a point from her course. The black house loomed large like a rock, and above the sound of the wind and waves rose the roar of falling waters. Then a fierce blast of wind sent the *Hope and Glory* surging forward on the crest of a great wave; there was a crash and a shock that sent Tankerlane spinning to the mast like a stone from a sling, and the vessel's bow slid up from the water, in a wild tumult of foam and falling stone.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE TURNING OF THE TIDE

"THE boat," yelled Dowsett, as the bow-sprit of the *Hope and Glory* crashed through the wooden wall of the cottage, and quivered like a reed in the wind. "'Tis our only chance. House'll go afore boat."

He staggered up from the floor with Laura in his arms, and his wife cowered against the wall with her eyes fixed on the great spar overhead.

"Don't stare, fool," he shouted. "Here, take the lass, and hand her me through window."

He flung aside the box and the table, and, picking up a heavy chair, beat out the framework of the window in three stupendous blows. Then he swung himself through the gap. And the house rocked beneath him, as a house rocks in an earthquake.

"Hi, you there," he yelled, "quick, lend a hand. There's lives to be saved here, there be. Lend a hand. You'm right 'nuff on the wall."

Tankerlane lurched forward like a drunken man and gripped the forestay. The bow of the boat was a bare yard from the wall of the cottage.

"Two women," shouted Dowsett, disappearing into the room. "Stay where you are."

Tankerlane did not move, but his face grew pale, as he watched the scene before his eyes. On either side of the *Hope and Glory* the walls were crumbling like a castle of sand. Through the gaps poured two boiling cataracts of foam, and he could see the cottage sway to and fro, as the huge spouts of water leapt against it.

Then Dowsett re-appeared with a woman in his arms, and Tankerlane, leaning forward, gripped her body with one arm,

and drew it on to the deck. It was swathed from head to foot in blankets, and he could not see the face.

"Take her below," shouted Dowsett. "She'm ill, and must lie in a warm spot. I'll manage t'other myself."

Tankerlane carried his burden along the deck. The water rolled a foot deep over the after part of the vessel, and the waves swept right up the hatchway. He waited for a favourable moment, and then lifted the hatch.

"Shil," he cried, "here, quick. Take this woman, and lay her carefully on one of the bunks. She's ill."

Shil was already at the foot of the ladder, and, stretching out his arms, took the lifeless bundle from Tankerlane's hands.

"Be careful with her," said Tankerlane. "I'll put the hatch on to keep the waves out, and be with you in a minute."

He replaced the hatch just in time, and a great wave swept him for'ard on his hands and knees. Rising to his feet, he saw Dowsett clinging to the forestay, and helping an elderly woman on to the boat. Then suddenly the black cottage before him seemed to crumple up like a house of cards. The lights went out, the walls caved in, and the whole dwelling appeared to dissolve in a white mist. For one moment a great piece of the roof hung on the bowsprit of the smack. Then, the weight of the unsupported tile and timber snapped the spar like a twig, and nothing was left of Dowsett's house but a few black specks, dancing and whirling in a torrent of foam.

"Near go," said Dowsett, catching his wife by the waist and looking steadily at the swirl of waters which marked the site of his old home.

"Oh, them carpets and things," wailed the woman. "Oh Sam, 'tis cruel work, and we've saved so hard, we have, for them bits of stuff."

"Tush, woman," said Dowsett sternly. "Thank God for life. Who be you?" and he turned to Tankerlane with a fierce glare in his eyes.

"The *Hope and Glory*," said Tankerlane, "from Gorehaven."

"Yardley's smack. Where be Yardley, and that limb of the devil, young Playle?"

"Overboard," Tankerlane replied curtly. He was already learning to spare his words, following the example of men of action.

"Dead?" queried Dowsett. "And you? Who be you?"

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"No sailor, as you may guess."

"Be alone?"

"There's another man in the cabin, Mr John Shil, of Black Hall."

"Mr Shil?" cried Mrs Dowsett. "The Lord be praised, the Lord be praised. We thought him dead."

"You thought him dead?" asked Tankerlane slowly, as the truth began to force itself into his mind. "Who are you, then?"

"Sam Dowsett I be."

"And the lady you handed me just now, the lady who is ill?"

"Friend of Mr Shil's—stayin' with us—mebbe you knows more'n we do, if you be a friend of Mr Shil's."

"Certainly I do," replied Tankerlane. "She is Lady Tankerlane, and my wife."

Dowsett did not answer, but he looked at his wife as though she might help him out of the intricacies of a difficult position. She did not offer to do so, however, and he sought refuge in matters which required immediate attention.

"Where be Mr Shil, sir?" he asked.

"Down below. He is helpless. I have had to sail the boat by myself. We picked him up on Black Spit Island; he's half dead and has lost his sight. But I'm not concerned with him. What's the matter with my wife, Lady Tankerlane?"

"Fever on the brain," said Mrs Dowsett. "Poor lamb. She'd just passed the worst; and now this has come, 'twill kill her for sartin."

"Go and look after her at once," said Tankerlane. "I'll make good—everything you've lost in the house, and reward you handsomely—you must get Mr Shil out of the cabin—and answer no questions. If my wife comes to her senses, she must not be told of my presence."

"She'm asleep, poor dear. The doctor's medicine as we gave her still holds."

"Well—when she wakes—she must be told nothing—to disturb her mind. I and your husband—will do all that can be done—on deck. But you get below—you——"

He spoke in short, gasping sentences, and Dowsett saw that his face was white as a sheet. Then he stopped suddenly, and, staggering back a pace or two, clung to one of the stays for support.

"You be ill, sir," said Dowsett.

"Yes," Tankerlane muttered faintly, "I'm done up. I've been sick, horribly sick—and I've had to do so much; the strain has unnerved me."

"You go below to the lass," said Dowsett to his wife, "and tell Mr Shil——"

"No," cried Tankerlane, "don't you speak to him. He'll know your voice. I'll tell him." He let go the stay, and crawled aft to the hatch. But before he reached it, the woodwork heaved upwards, and Shil's head appeared.

"Water's coming in," cried the blind man. "It's a foot deep on the floor. What's happened? Why the devil don't you speak? Can't you understand what this silence means to a man who can't see? Where are we? What has happened?"

"Take my hand," said Tankerlane, "and come up on deck."

Shil groped for the outstretched hand, and Tankerlane exerted his strength to help him out of the hatchway. Then he led him forward.

"You just lie down here," he said. "and keep quiet. It's all right."

Shil lay down on the wet deck, and clung to the bitts with his hands. Tankerlane beckoned to Dowsett, and went aft to the cabin. And all the time the *Hope and Glory* rose and fell on the waves, and ground away the wall beneath her keel with a succession of shocks that must have started every timber in her hull.

The two men made their way into the cabin, and carried Laura through the door which led into the foc's'le. This end of the boat was high and dry on the wall, and it was the work of a few minutes to prepare a warm and comfortable bed for the invalid. Then they rescued a considerable portion of the food from the water which was steadily rising in the main cabin, and lit a small oil stove.

"You go in the foc's'le," said Dowsett to his wife when he returned on deck. "You'll be snug 'nuff there with the lass." He spoke in a whisper, so that Shil should not hear. He had no desire to serve Tankerlane in the matter, but he thought it best to keep Shil in ignorance till they were all out of danger.

Mrs Dowsett disappeared down the foc's'le hatch, and her husband drew Tankerlane aside to the after part of the vessel.

"Mebbe she'll hold," he said quietly, "and mebbe she won't. I reckon her back's broken, and she may fall in two, if the tide

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don't turn soon. 'Tis high now by rights, but mebbe the wind'll keep the water up a bit longer."

"Can't we do anything?" asked Tankerlane wearily. He was so tired and ill and broken down with the strain of the last few hours that he was conscious of nothing save a vague danger that lay somewhere in the two great torrents of water streaming past him on either side.

"We can do nowt," Dowsett replied grimly, "save pray that the timbers hold together, and pray that tide may turn."

"And if she breaks up?"

"We'll have to take to the dinghy. 'Tis our last chance."

"Why not get into it now?"

"'Twould kill the lass for sartin. 'Tis well enough for us. But 'twould be the death of her. But tide'll start fallin' in a few minutes, and then the wall'll show, and there'll be summat for us to take foot on. If only the island would flood to sea-level, 'twould be safe 'nuff; we'd just float inland, where 'tis calm as a river. But Con'sea's a big place, and 'twill take a lot of water to fill it. D'you see that light yonder?" and he pointed at a faint yellow star further up the creek.

"I see it."

"Well, my mate's up there in my boat, the *William and Sarah*, on our upper moorin's. If we could get to her, or she could drop down to us, 'twould be all right."

"Can't we signal to her?"

"My mate couldn't come down single-handed. 'Tis 'gainst wind and tide. But I could run up to him."

The two men looked at the distant speck of light, and then Dowsett went aft, knee-deep in water, and looked at the dinghy.

"She'm right 'nuff," he said; "strong little boat she be. Have you a sail to her?"

"I don't know."

Dowsett hunted about in the foc's'le and found a mast and sail.

"I'll get up there in five minute," he said, "and we'll be down again 'bout twenty."

"But supposing you do not find us when you return," said Tankerlane. "Supposing this vessel breaks up while you are away. You are the only able-bodied man among the lot of us. And we shan't even have the boat to escape in."

Sam Dowsett paused in his preparations, and scratched his head thoughtfully.

"I hadn't thought of that, sir," he said. "Of course, I can't be leavin' you so long as there be danger of her breakin' up. She'm bumpin' cruel hard, she be. I'll wait till the tide falls a bit and then I'll go up and fetch my boat down. Mebbe the wind'll drop with tide. It must ha' nearly blown itself out."

Sir William Tankerlane, faint and dizzy with cold and sickness, looked seawards, and the sight was not calculated to lighten the fears of a landsman. The gale still howled furiously across the water, and shrieked through the rigging. The waves rolled on in long walls of white foam, and each one of them surged up the deck as far as the mast. The stern of the *Hope and Glory* was deep under the water. Perhaps this circumstance was really a safeguard to the rest of the vessel, for the after part of the boat, instead of rising on the waves and driving the bows still further over the bank, acted as an anchor, and even as a kind of breakwater. But Tankerlane could not be expected to realise this, and he only saw that the smack was a hopeless wreck.

"She'm a powerful good boat," said Dowsett, as he stood with Tankerlane by the mast. "I reckon she's best teak. Tide's turnin', sir, tide's turnin', thank the Lord." He leant forward and pointed at the sea.

"I'll take your word for it," said Tankerlane, who had not observed any change in the surroundings.

"Tide's turnin' sure 'nuff. See that bit of weed goin' seaward against the wind. You go for'ard, and speak to Mr Shil. I've respected your wishes till now, sir, for the sake of peace, but it must have been hell for him there this last half hour. My heart's gone out to him, it has."

"Yes," said Tankerlane quietly, "it must have been hell for him. Yet we did right. It would have been a bad time for all of us, and worst of all for him, if he'd known my wife was on board."

Of a truth John Shil had atoned for much in that time of hideous darkness. He could see nothing; he could hear nothing but the roar of wind and water, and occasionally the distant murmur of voices. No one came near to speak to him. He did not know what had happened, or what was going to happen. He realised that the vessel had run ashore, and that strangers had come aboard, and the violent shocks, which vibrated through every timber of the deck beneath him, told him that the woodwork was being slowly shaken to pieces.

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Tankerlane crept slowly along the deck to speak to his rival. His own strength was nearly exhausted, and though he could see, he saw much that he would rather not have seen.

"It's all right," he said calmly, "the tide's turned. We're on the wall of Conasea Island, but the tide has turned, and we'll be safe enough if we can last for a little while longer."

"Conasea Island?" muttered Shil, raising his head from the deck; "who've we got aboard?"

Tankerlane did not answer, but, turning away, went back to Dowsett, who was placing the mast and sail in the dinghy. Shil tried to struggle to his feet, but a sudden crash of the boat on the wall sent him down on to the deck again.

"Tide's runnin' out fast," said Dowsett, "makin' up for lost time, I reckon. Soon as bow's out of water, I'll get along to the *William and Sarah*, and get 'ee all aboard in comfort."

Tankerlane looked at the torrent which poured over the broken wall. Even his inexperienced eyes could see that the stream of water was diminishing in volume, until the wall itself appeared, uneven, black, and jagged, like the rampart of some ruined castle.

Then at last the water left the forepart of the *Hope and Glory*, and the shattered stern, wrenched further apart by the swift current of the falling tide, broke away, and disappeared in the foaming sea. Only half the vessel remained, but that was safe and steady as the ground itself.

Dowsett hoisted the sail in the dinghy, and went tearing up the creek against the tide. Tankerlane went for'ard, and stood over the prostrate form of John Shil.

"We're safe," he said slowly, "high and dry on the wall. Dowsett is going to take us on board his boat. His house has been swept away in the flood."

"Dowsett," cried Shil, lifting himself to a sitting position and staring wildly from side to side. "Then Laura—where is she? Is she alive? Speak, man, quick."

Tankerlane was silent, and watched his enemy with a cruel smile. Now that they were safe from all danger, he had time to fan the flame of his hatred. John Shil struggled to his feet, and threw out his great arms.

"Where is she?" he cried hoarsely. "Tell me, or, by Heaven, if I can lay hands on you——"

"My wife is here in the boat," said Tankerlane coldly. "But that can hardly concern you. I hope that you will act

as a man of honour, and return to the woman you have asked to be your wife."

"Don't talk to me of honour," cried John Shil, shuffling painfully across the sloping deck and beating the air with his hands.

"I'd be careful if I were you," said Tankerlane. "You may have a nasty fall. I intend to take Laura away with me. She shall never set eyes on you again."

"Oh, merciful God," cried Shil in his agony, "give me sight that I may see this man, and kill him."

Then, as he rushed forward, he stumbled over a rope, and fell heavily to the deck.

And William Tankerlane laughed as he saw the motionless body. The truce was over between them. And victory was in sight.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE ORDEAL

Two months after the wreck of the *Hope and Glory* on the wall of Conasea Island, John Shil sat in the library of Black Hall, and stared into the darkness which had now become part of his life.

Outside the window the sun shone on a snow-covered landscape, and the brilliant light was dazzling to the eyes. Within the room a large fire blazed and crackled cheerfully in the grate. But for John Shil it was still night.

In spite of his great physical strength, the terrible hours he had spent in his struggle for life had left their mark upon his constitution. Cold, exposure, hunger, and agony of mind, had reduced his body to the last stages of exhaustion. His whole frame had collapsed in the last burst of passion, when he had staggered across the deck to vent his fury on William Tankerlane, and when he was finally taken back to Black Hall, he was very near to death.

For five weeks he lay in bed, until complete rest and careful nursing had restored his strength. During that time Leonore had called to see him nearly every day, but the doctor, acting on Shil's instructions, had refused to allow her to see the invalid, giving as a sufficient reason that he was not strong enough to see anyone.

The most eminent eye specialist in England had been summoned from London to do all that could be done for Shil's blindness. At first, after consultation with the local doctor, he had held out some hope of recovery. But he had only done this, because the invalid was too weak to hear the truth, and directly Shil was strong enough to listen to the verdict, he was told that he would never be able to see anything again.

He received the news as a brave man might receive a sentence of death, and then he dictated a letter to Leonore Jackson, saying that he was now well enough to meet her, and asking her to call as soon as she could conveniently manage to come to Black Hall.

And on this sunny winter's morning he was waiting her arrival in the library, and trying to look into the future which lay before him.

The darkness, which shuts out all visible things from a man's eyes, only strengthens that mental sight which has the whole world of thought and imagination spread before it like a panorama. The brain of the blind man sees clearly enough into matters which physical eyesight only obscures. His life is a life in which all realities have faded into darkness, and the unsubstantial has become the real. And so it came to pass that John Shil saw very clearly into the problems of the future.

He saw before him a life without profit either to himself or other people. His infirmity would stand in the way of any work which called for action. He would have to be content to think, and give orders, and trust to the orders being carried out. A man of great intellect might have consoled himself with the knowledge that he still had the use of his brain, and that, after all, the brain is the essential part of a human being. But Shil was not a man of great intellect, and the only work that he had ever done had been work which required personal supervision. He could do this work no longer. He could not ride round his estate and superintend the re-building of insanitary cottages, the refencing of plantations, the draining of fields, and the thousand and one things which require the keen eye of an expert. He could only issue his orders, and trust to others to see them executed. He was helpless as a log. The loss of his limbs would have been less to him than this loss of sight. He could only drag out a weary existence, without hope, without labour, without love.

Yet he knew that there was a woman who loved him, and who would lead him tenderly through life. But his heart revolted from her; the interview that lay before him had only been arranged with one object. He must know the truth. He must find out what part Leonore had played in the tragedy of Laura's marriage. He must hear the truth from Leonore's own lips. Perhaps she would lie to him. But, though he could not see her face, he would judge her from her voice, from

the words which she used to conceal her thoughts. He would find out, and if she were unworthy, he would never marry her. He would rather live out his life of darkness alone.

Of Laura he knew nothing save that which he had gathered from local gossip. She had been taken on the *William and Sarah* to Gorehaven, and had been placed in the small hospital in that town. Within the last few days she had been moved to Tankerlane Court, and Sir William Tankerlane had accompanied her. He had received no message from either of them. It was possible that he would never come into touch with either of them again. Sir William would keep a tight hold on his wife for the future, and it was possible that Laura's spirit had been entirely broken by her illness.

Yet he thought much of her in those first days of the darkness, and the flame of his love burnt more fiercely than ever in the gloom. But he knew that he would never take her from her husband, and that only the death of Tankerlane would give him the desire of his heart. This much, at least, his adversity had already taught him. It had shown him the depth of the sin that he had contemplated ; it had laid bare the awful pit into which he would have cast his own soul and the soul of the woman he loved. In his own sufferings he saw the hand of a Father who chastens His rebellious children, to turn them from the error of their ways.

This much good, at any rate, had come to John Shil out of his illness. He was too ordinary and too human to bear his awful affliction with the patience of a philosopher or a saint. But he realised that it was a punishment, and, though he chafed bitterly under his burden of misery, he acknowledged that he had in some measure paid the penalty exacted by a just Judge. The law of his country had not yet punished him for the death of Ben Holland. But God had exacted full repayment for those few moments of indecision when the man had gone down to his death.

And even in the midst of his mental sufferings he felt that God had stayed the full force of His vengeance. Twice had he been very near to death, and twice had his life been spared. Twice had Laura been brought down to the very edge of the Dark Valley, and twice had she been led back again to the light. He was as yet too sorely tried by his blindness to be grateful for his own life ; but he thanked God that Laura had been saved, and he could not help thinking that both their

lives had been spared for some object, and that sin could have no place hereafter in either of their hearts.

It was a lonely and a humble man that rose to greet Leonore Jackson, as she entered the smoking-room at Black Hall, and as the door closed behind her, she paused with a look of horror in her eyes. She knew nothing of the change that had been wrought within, but she shrank from the physical weakness and pain that she saw in every feature and every limb. The great frame was a mere skeleton on which the clothes hung loosely; the back was curved, and the knees bent, as though unable to support the weight of the body; the hands were white and bony; the face was drawn and haggard and old. It was the face of a mask, almost without life, for the eyes which give life to the face were covered with a hideous green shade, and the features were moulded into a permanent expression of pain.

"Ah, Leonore," he said in a harsh, broken voice. "Is that you? Here is my hand. I cannot see yours to take it."

Leonore hesitated for a moment, and then, moving quickly forward, she seized the outstretched hand in hers and pressed it to her lips.

"Jack," she whispered, looking eagerly at his face. She waited for a moment, as though expecting him to take her in his arms. Then, as he made no attempt at any more intimate greeting, she came closer to him, and still held his hand.

"Jack," she repeated in a faint voice, "how cruel you are!"

Her words roused him from his lethargy, and he drew his hand from her clasp.

"I am glad you have come, Leonore," he said, in that same harsh voice. "It has been very lonely, and it is good to hear the voice of a friend."

"Yes," she echoed faintly, "it must be good to hear the voice of—a friend."

"Will you please sit down?" he continued. "Come near to the fire and warm yourself. You must be cold."

"The fire will not warm me," she answered in a low, strained voice; "I have not come very far, you see. I have been staying at the Blue Anchor at Pinge the last six weeks, and the landlord drove me over in his dog-cart. I have not even wet my feet with the snow."

"Oh yes, of course," he said hurriedly. "I had forgotten. Forgive me. I should have remembered."

"Well?" she asked wearily, as she seated herself in a chair by the fire. "What do you wish to say to me?" Her voice was cold and hard. She had expected such a different meeting to this.

But he had repulsed her as plainly as though he had thrust her from him with his hands. No amount of indifference could explain the coldness of his voice, for she knew that his strength and pride had been humbled in the dust, and at such moments the human heart welcomes even the sympathy of a stranger.

He did not answer her question, but, turning round, groped feebly for his chair. The action, simple enough in itself, spoke eloquently of all that had happened since last they met. In a moment the hard look died from her eyes, and, rising swiftly to her feet, she took him by the hand and led him to his seat. He did not resist, and, when he had seated himself, she fell on her knees by his side, and, pressing her face down on his gaunt hand, wept bitterly.

"Leonore," he cried out, "Leonore! There is nothing to grieve over. I shall soon be well. Please don't cry, Leonore. I want to hear you laugh. It is a long time since I have heard anyone laugh."

And Leonore laughed, as a woman might laugh at the failure of her own life. Would nothing move this man?

"That is better," he said with a smile. She raised her tear-stained face and looked at him. There was no smile on her own lips.

"May I sit here," she whispered, "while we talk?"

"Yes, yes, of course, Leonore," he answered, with a touch of irritation in his voice, "if you are comfortable on the floor."

She did not reply, but her fingers sought his hand, and her caress was more eloquent than any words could have been.

"I've been thinking, Leonore," he began. "I've had plenty of time for thinking these last few weeks." He paused, and his face twitched nervously.

"Yes?" she murmured after a pause. "Yes, Jack?"

"I've been thinking about our marriage," he continued. "I am not the same as when you promised to marry me. I can only be a hindrance to your life. I can never do much in

the world now, but sit down and wait. I should be a helpless burden to any woman, and especially to a woman of talent."

She did not answer him, but her fingers tightened on his hand, as though he were slipping from her grasp.

"I have been thinking," he went on in a low voice, "that I have no right to bind you to me, and that even if you wished it, I have no right to take advantage of your pity."

"I love you," she whispered; "is that not enough?"

"No," he replied, "it is not enough. I have no right to spoil your life." He spoke calmly, like one who discusses a matter of business. There was no tenderness, no self-renunciation in his voice. She looked at him sharply, but his face was so stamped with suffering that she could read nothing of his thoughts.

"Then other things have happened since last we met," he continued. "You know all about Laura, how she came to me for protection, how I concealed her from her husband on Conasea Island, how I dishonoured myself in so doing, and was faithless to the woman I had promised to marry, though I only sinned in thought. You know all this?"

"I know it," she replied coldly. The mention of Laura's name had taken all the tenderness from her voice.

"And knowing it, are you still content to marry me?"

She rose to her feet, and faced him with a white face and flashing eyes.

"You wish me to release you," she cried. "Why do you pretend that you are thinking of my happiness? What has happened? Why can't you speak out like a man?"

"I am not much of a man—now," Shil replied slowly. "But I do not intend to be a burden to any woman."

"Burden?" she exclaimed sadly. "No, it is not that you are thinking of. You do not like me. I can see it in your face, can hear it in your voice. Oh, for pity's sake, speak plainly to me, Jack. Tell me what I have done, I do so want to help you and comfort you in your sorrow."

"I have been brought low," said John Shil sternly, "but not so low as to marry a woman who has deceived me. That would be a worse hell than the one in which I live already. The woman I marry will have to be my second self; I shall have to see everything through her eyes."

"What do you mean?" she cried fiercely. "What have I

done save love you with all my heart and soul? Why do you insult me?"

"There is no need to be angry, Leonore," he replied gently. "We have to talk this thing over quietly. I want to do what is best for the happiness of us both. You know how little love I have to give; but if we are to be happy, I must respect my wife and trust her thoroughly. How is it that you never told me of the death of Laura's child?"

"Why should I tell you? The accident was reported in every newspaper."

"Still, one would think that you would have mentioned it. I'm afraid, Leonore, that you did not wish me to know."

"Why should I conceal it from you?" she cried. "Why should I think you so devoid of all honour as to imagine that the news would make any difference to you? Was I to think that you would break your word to me, if you knew that the tie which bound Laura to her husband was broken?"

A faint flush came into Shil's white cheek. The argument was unanswerable.

"Well, Leonore," he replied, after a pause, "we will let that pass, though it is odd you should never have mentioned a matter of such importance. But there is another question I want you to answer. Is it true that you were once the wife of Sir William Tankerlane, and that you only divorced him three months ago?"

Leonore looked at him with terror in her eyes. She knew that sooner or later this question might have to be answered. But she did not expect it to fall from the lips of a man whose only happiness in life could come from marriage to a woman who loved him.

"Is this true?" Shil repeated sternly.

"Yes," she replied in a low voice, "it is true. Who told you?"

"Laura. I thought it merely the raving of a disordered mind. It was impossible to believe it."

"It is true enough. I intended to tell you before we were married. Of course I knew that Laura or her husband would tell you."

She spoke defiantly. She knew that the mere fact of her having been married to Tankerlane would have but little weight with John Shil. She only feared the inference he would draw from the fact.

For his part he was too astounded to form any definite ideas on the matter. The confession had started a dozen different trains of thought, and the whole history of the lives of Leonore, Laura, and William Tankerlane required readjustment. He passed his big bony hand across his forehead, and tried to see things in the new light which had been thrown upon them. His first thought was for Laura, and it was of her that he first spoke after a long silence.

"Then you," he said slowly, "you were Tankerlane's legal wife, when he first went through a form of marriage with Laura, and the child was illegitimate."

She did not answer. She had thrown herself into a chair, and was staring at him with fear in her eyes. She knew to what end this train of thought would lead him.

"Laura," he continued, gripping the edge of his chair, "was Tankerlane's mistress. I will remember that."

She did not speak, but she trembled as she saw the fury gathering in his hard face.

"This man," he shouted, rising to his feet with clenched hands and a face distorted with rage, "dishonoured her, and she sold herself to him in order that I might escape the consequences of my crime. I will remember that, Tankerlane; I will remember that."

"No," cried Leonore, "you are mistaken. Not even for you would Laura have sold her honour. She thought that she was Tankerlane's wife, till we all three chanced to meet in Paris. I had not then seen him for many years."

"And you told her the truth?"

"I told her the truth. She was a great friend of mine, and I thought it better that she should know. I saw that she wanted some excuse—some reason for leaving him. I offered to divorce him, so that he could marry her, and make some amends for his dishonourable conduct. But she would not hear of it; she insisted on leaving him. She did not know—she did not suspect—there is nothing else that I need tell you."

"Yes," Shil said slowly, "there is something else that I wish to know. When did you persuade her to marry Tankerlane? Was it that time when I followed you to Widley Street?"

"Yes," she replied, "was it not the right thing to do? There was the child to be thought of, and her own good name.

They were married at a registry office. In the eyes of the world they have been married for over two years. No breath of scandal has touched her reputation, until the day you——"

"Don't speak of me," he exclaimed. "I would do as much again if I thought it would serve her. But, Leonore, tell me why you went out of your way to persuade Laura to marry Tankerlane?"

"I did the right thing," she replied angrily; "there was nothing else that she could do—but I did not come here to be cross-examined. I came because I wanted to see you, and to help you; because I thought you were in trouble, and lonely, and that you would like the company—of a friend."

Her voice faltered, and her eyes filled with tears. The man, bent and rugged, still stood before her, and his great body towered above her, as though he were going to strike. His hands were clenched, his face was hard and cruel, his voice cold and judicial.

"You will best help me," he said quietly, "by telling me the truth. You persuaded Laura to marry Tankerlane in order that she could not marry me. Is that not so?"

She cowered back from him, as though he had struck her in the face, and placed her hands over her eyes.

"Oh, this is cruel," she sobbed, "this is brutal, inhuman, monstrous."

"Yet it is the truth," he continued sternly; "and it is also true that Tankerlane swore an oath to you never to speak of what he saw in the wood at Laverstone, and that you paid him a price for that oath, and the price you paid was this—you divorced him so that he should be free to marry Laura Vane."

"Oh, this is horrible," she shrieked, rising to her feet, and pressing her fingers to her ears. "Sit down, and turn your face from me. Be silent. Even if all this were true, you should be the last to reproach me—you, for whom I would do anything. Hasn't God punished you and brought you to the dust, and taught you charity, and kindness, and honour. I am the woman you asked to be your wife. Is that not enough to protect me from your insults? Is not my love for you worthy of some respect, some consideration, some tenderness? Have you no shame, no thought for one who has given you all her heart and soul?"

"Steady, Leonore," he replied gently. "I do not reproach

you. I am only asking you these questions in order that I may learn the truth."

"You are asking them in order to make me feel ashamed of what I have done. But I do not care. I would do it all again—I use your own words—I would do more—I would do anything in the name of love."

"You do well to rebuke me with my own words," he replied. "But God has punished me for them already."

He turned away from her, and groped for his chair. This time she did not offer to help him, but watched him with blazing eyes. Her small and frail body trembled with passion. She had offered him so much, and he had cast it all back in her face.

"I suppose you think that Laura will leave her husband again," she said fiercely, "and that she will come to you again and ask for your protection. Has it not occurred to you that she has perhaps learnt a lesson from adversity?"

"If she has not," he replied, "I have already done so. You may rest assured, Leonore, that I and Laura Tankerlane will never meet again in this world, unless she comes to me. I shall never seek her out. I shall stay on here—alone."

He found his chair, and flung himself wearily on the soft leather cushions. The excitement of the interview had left its mark upon his face. The lips were almost white, and twitched nervously. The anger died from Leonore's eyes, as she looked upon the wreck of a strong man, and the sight moved her once more to pity. Besides, had she not heard from his own lips that he would never seek out Laura Tankerlane again? It was not because of Laura that he had tried to drive her from his side.

She moved forward timidly, as though his blind eyes could see her every movement, and when she reached his chair, she once more sank on her knees, and touched his hand with her fingers.

"Jack," she whispered softly.

"Yes, Leonore."

"Why do we talk of things that can only keep us apart. Is there so little pain and sorrow in the world that one has to seek it? Have we not both suffered enough?"

"I shall suffer yet more," he replied in a low voice; "the cup is not yet full."

"I love you," she whispered tenderly. "Can I not be near

you to help you in your sorrow, to lighten your darkness? Let me devote my life to you. You shall see with my eyes, and I will be your second self. If you need proof of my devotion, surely you can see it now. I have stifled my pride, I have forgiven the bitter words you used to me. I am here pleading on my knees to you. No woman could so humble herself, save with the humility of love. Let me serve you with my whole life."

"Leonore, Leonore," he cried piteously, "no woman should speak to a man like this. It is I who should plead. The sin is mine. It is I who should ask for forgiveness."

She looked tenderly at his white face, and then, half rising from the floor, she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him on the lips.

The action was so sudden that the blind man was powerless to resist it. But he did not respond to the embrace. She unloosed her arms, and, sinking back on the floor, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

"Leonore," he said gently, "you must leave me. You must not come here again."

She did not answer, but seized his hand and clung to it, as though no force on earth should drag him from her side.

"Leonore," he said more sternly, "this is folly, madness. Our marriage must not take place. It will be better for you—better for me, if we do not meet again."

"Have you thought of what that will mean?" she asked slowly.

"Yes," he replied. "It will mean freedom for you. Your talents ought never to be obscured by the dulling influence of married life. As a wife your great gifts will be wasted. As the wife of an invalid, of a groping, puling child—for I am no better than a child in my blindness—they would be lost for ever. Think of the life, Leonore, tied to a log like me, who cannot even see the smile on your face. Why, it will be penal servitude!"

"Have you thought of what it will mean to you? Of your own life passed in loneliness and darkness, at the mercy of servants who will rob you, of acquaintances who will pity you."

"I have thought of all that. Yet it would be better than

the ruin of a young and brilliant woman, who has a great career before her. I have done enough mischief in my life already."

"Jack," she said calmly, "do you wish me to believe that you are only thinking of me in this matter? I cannot forget what you have just said to me."

"You are justified in making that remark," he replied. "When you first told me the truth I thought chiefly of what you had told me. But I know now that you love me so well that your love is an excuse for anything you may have done. And, knowing this, I refuse to ruin your life."

She was silent, and though he could not see her face, he realised that she did not believe him.

"You do not believe me?" he continued, "but I tell you, Leonore, that if I were as other men, and my sight were restored to me, I would marry you in spite of everything. I swear this to you."

"Knowing that your sight can never be restored," she retorted; "yet it is now that you need me. I cannot bear to speak of what lies before you. I cannot bear even to think of it. I only know that I wish to be with you in your darkness."

"I can fight my own battles," he replied slowly, "and it is better that no one else should get hurt in them. I shall soon get used to the darkness. They say it is only the first month or two that is so hard to bear. I shall probably pay some good-natured and intelligent man to come and live with me. Good-bye, Leonore."

"No, no," she sobbed, "I cannot leave you like this. I cannot do it, Jack; it will kill me."

"Ah, you will soon forget, Leonore. I shall pass out of your life as I have passed out of the lives of Laura and William Tankerlane. I have much to be thankful for. I might have been a poor man, dependent for my livelihood on my work. As it is, I have only to sit still and do nothing. I shall not starve."

"Oh, this is brutal, horrible," she cried, rising to her feet. "I cannot bear it. Have pity on me, Jack."

"You will forget, Leonore, you will forget. You have your work to do. You are famous already, but time will only add to your fame. You will live to thank heaven that you never became the wife of an obscure country gentleman. As for

me, I shall stand my darkness as long as I can, and there is always a way out of it."

"You must not speak like that," she cried fiercely. "Oh, I cannot leave you. It is as I thought, as I feared. You intend to take your own life. I will not leave you!"

He rose slowly to his feet—so slowly that he might have had all the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Leonore," he said calmly, "twice since I last saw you has God given me back my life. I spoke idly just now. You may be quite sure that I shall never be so wicked, so ungrateful, as to do the thing you fear. I still have some manhood left in me; I will try to show the world how a man can bear the punishment he has justly deserved."

"But you said it, you said it," she cried, clinging to his arm and looking up into his face. "It was in your mind."

"It was a moment's madness," he repeated. "It was only a thought, and I am still strong enough to control myself."

"Yet you will grow weaker," she continued. "Day by day you will grow weaker. The darkness and the loneliness will sap your strength. You will brood over your misfortunes and over all you have lost. The long, dreary days will leave their mark upon your brain. You will cry out, and no one will answer you. At last you will give way."

"It is not a pleasant picture," said Shil calmly. Yet he knew well enough that it was not overdrawn.

"Yet all this might be changed," she pleaded. "With someone to love you and look after you, and cheer you up, it might all be so different. I implore you, Jack, to keep your word to me—the word of an honourable man. I will do so much for you; I will devote all my life to you, every moment of it."

"That is a more pleasant picture," he replied, "but I will not allow myself to look at it. I have made up my mind, Leonore, and nothing will turn me from my purpose. Is the landlord of the Blue Anchor waiting for you, or shall I send you back to Pingé in one of my own carriages?"

She let go of his arm, and walked away from him. She had used every argument at her disposal, and had used them all in vain.

"Is it all over?" she whispered, so faintly that he could scarcely hear her voice.

"It is all over," he replied. "Good-bye, Leonore." And

he held out his hand. She came slowly forward, and took it in both of hers.

"Am I never to see you again?" she faltered.

"I should always be glad to see you—as a friend. But I think you had better not come here again. People will understand—why our engagement is broken off."

She raised his hand to her lips, and he felt the warm tears on his wrist.

"God bless you, Leonore," he muttered. "You are well rid of me. Good-bye."

He placed his thin fingers on either side of her head, and, stooping down, kissed her on the forehead.

She did not speak, but, wrenching herself from his grasp, staggered towards the door, holding out her hands as though she, too, were blind. And her face was almost like the face of a dead woman.

When she had gone, and the door had closed behind her, he stood motionless and stared into the night. He had thrust from him the love and sympathy which might have brought light into his darkness. There only remained for him a life to be lived alone, and the bitter memory of all that two women had suffered for his sake.

CHAPTER XXXVII

RESIGNATION

WHEN Mrs Dowsett gave Laura a sleeping draught on the night of the great storm, either her hand trembled with excitement, or else, like many of her class, she believed in the efficacy of a double dose. She poured out far too much of the mixture, and in consequence Laura did not wake from her sleep till some hours after she had been placed on board the *William and Sarah*, and when she did wake, her condition was so serious that Sam Dowsett decided to start for Gorehaven at daylight, and place her in the hands of the doctor.

As luck would have it, the wind shifted to the sou'-west, and before daybreak the storm had almost blown itself out.

Directly the oyster smack dropped anchor in Gorehaven harbour, William Tankerlane and Sam Dowsett went ashore. The former made his way to the house of Dr Hardy, and the latter sought out the humble cottages of Bill Yardley and Joe Playle, carrying the sad message that so often comes from the sea.

Tankerlane's interview with the doctor was short and to the point.

"I understand, sir," he said, as he entered the consulting-room, "that you have been attending a lady at Dowsett's Farm, on Conasea Island. The lady is my wife, and she is now on board a smack in the harbour."

"Whoever brought her here," the doctor replied, "may be responsible for her death."

Tankerlane explained matters in a few words, and Dr Hardy's face darkened as he listened to the story.

"I will come on board at once," he said. "May I ask your name?"

"Tankerlane—Sir William Tankerlane."

"Of Tankerlane Court?"

"Yes."

"I know it well. My father has a living in your gift—about six miles from Laverstone."

"Oh yes, of course. I know him—fine old chap. How small the world is!"

On their way down to the harbour the two men chatted together as though they had known each other for years. In no country in the world is there so much local affection as in England. Dr Hardy's boyhood had been passed in the shadow of the Stonewold Hills, and he loved every wall and tree in the district.

"'Tis a poor living," said Tankerlane, as they discussed the neighbourhood. "My father intended to endow it with a gift of £5000. He had a great liking for 'High Church Hardy,' as he called him. I've had so much else to think of since my father died, but I've felt I'd like to carry out his wishes."

And then, after a few remarks on the agricultural depression, which affects landowners and clergy alike, Tankerlane made a remark which had a very obvious connection with the poverty of the Rev. John Hardy's living.

"You will, of course, look to me for your fees in connection with my wife's illness, though I suppose Mr Shil has made himself responsible for them."

"I shall, of course, look to the husband."

"Well, I don't want to drag you into our private affairs, Dr Hardy, but you will understand the necessity of avoiding all scandal." Dr Hardy smiled.

"Doctors," he replied, "know how to keep silence as well as lawyers and bankers. And I am not married."

"My wife must be taken back to Tankerlane Court as soon as she is well enough to travel."

Dr Hardy was silent. He was thinking about a far longer journey which the sick woman might yet be called upon to take.

"Do you think there is any danger?" Tankerlane asked quickly. The doctor looked at his face and learnt that which he wished to know. It was evident that Sir William Tankerlane loved his wife.

"It is most unfortunate," he said gravely, "most unfortunate. But we will do all we can."

"There is Mr Shil, too," said Tankerlane. "I should say



his vitality has been sapped to the limit. It is, I may say, necessary that my wife should know nothing about him."

When they reached the *William and Sarah*, Dr Hardy examined both the patients, and ordered Laura's immediate removal to the local hospital. He advised that John Shil, who was suffering chiefly from sheer exhaustion, should be taken back to Black Hall, and that a great eye specialist should be sent for.

"Will he ever recover his sight?" asked Tankerlane.

"I don't know. I should not like to say. The eye is a tricky thing. Sir George Carr's opinion will decide his fate. He is rarely in error. But one thing is quite certain, that, if he is hopelessly blind, he must not be told the truth till he is strong enough to hear it."

"I can rely on you keeping all knowledge of this from Lady Tankerlane?"

"Certainly; but with regard to yourself, Sir William, I don't think you had better see your wife till she sends for you. I have no wish to inquire into your private affairs, but it is quite evident that it would not be wise to thrust your society upon her at the present time."

"I understand," Tankerlane replied. "I will carry out your orders."

And so it came to pass that John Shil was taken to Black Hall, and Laura was removed from the boat to the hospital, and Sir William Tankerlane took rooms at the Green Man and waited for his wife to send for him.

But two weeks elapsed before Laura was strong enough to see anyone, and then she asked for John Shil. She was told that Mr Shil was at Black Hall, and that he was too ill to leave his house. Then she asked question after question, and worked herself into such a state of peevish excitement that Dr Hardy thought it advisable to tell her something of the truth.

"My dear Lady Tankerlane," he said gently, and then he paused, knowing that the mere mention of her name would tell her part of that which he wished her to know. She looked at him with fear in her eyes, and he laid his cool hand on her pulse.

"Where is he?" she whispered. "How did you know?"

"Sir William is at the Green Man," he replied. "He is waiting till you are well enough to see him. He will not force

himself upon you. He will wait till you send for him. I hope you won't consider it an impertinence if I advise you to send for him as soon as possible. He is very anxious about you, and I can see that he loves you dearly."

A whole week passed before Laura decided to see her husband. And then she sent for him, not because she really wished to see him, but because the meeting was inevitable, and she wanted to get it over. He was waiting like a sentry at the gate of her prison house, and she could not escape from him.

The interview was short and remarkable for the way in which both parties avoided any reference to the past. Dr Hardy had warned Sir William that Lady Tankerlane must not be allowed to speak about anything which would excite or distress her; that the meeting must be short, and, if possible, devoid of all emotion.

Acting on these orders, Sir William reduced the whole scene to the commonplace level of a drawing-room conversation between two friends. Neither on his arrival nor on his departure did he attempt to kiss his wife, and his greeting was a bare touch of the hand. They conversed on the most ordinary subjects, and in the most ordinary tone of voice.

Yet, when Tankerlane left, he felt that he had bridged a great gulf with a slender plank that he might yet build up to bear his weight. He had picked his words carefully. But he had contrived to show his wife that he had forgiven her, and that, in spite of her folly, he still loved her with all his heart and soul.

Another week passed, and she consented to see him again, and this time he approached the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"Laura," he said gently, when Dr Hardy had left the room, "in three weeks' time you will be able to be moved from here. What arrangements shall I make for you?"

"I will make my own arrangements," she replied in a low, weak voice. "I do not wish to be a burden to you."

"Laura," he said firmly, "you are my wife."

"You can get a divorce," she replied. "It will be easy enough after what has happened."

"I love you, Laura," he continued, "and I know that you have done nothing dishonourable. Surely I, at any rate, should know that, after all that has passed between us. I do not wish to force my presence on you, Laura, but I think that

it would be best for you to return to Tankerlane Court. You can live your life there as you please. You shall have your own apartments, and I will not enter them unless you send for me. I have told everyone that you went away to stay with friends, and there will be no scandal. Then there is your father in Laverstone. He is getting old, Laura, and you are all he has in the world."

"I think I will live at the farm with my father."

"That would be impossible," Tankerlane said decisively. "You must see that such a proceeding would give rise to a scandal. But your father can come and stay with you at the Court, if you like to have him there."

"What is our life to be—our future?" she murmured wearily. "How much better it would have been for everyone if I had died!"

"Laura," he said tenderly, "it is I who have wrecked your life, yet all I have done has been done in the name of love. You are still my wife, even though our marriage is a mere mockery. Can we not live in peace at any rate? Our child is there—at Laverstone. I think if we lived there, you could tolerate my company—you could at least be kind to me. I have suffered much during your illness. The thought that you might die without a word of forgiveness was terrible to bear. I came down into Essex, mad with fury at your desertion of me, and with the idea of vengeance; I even had a loaded revolver in my pocket so that I might kill you and Shil. But my anger has died away. I am a humbled and broken man."

He spoke eloquently, passionately, like a man pleading for his very life, and Laura, weak and weary after her illness, began to cry softly and quietly, as though even the power to weep were denied to her.

"Come back to Laverstone, Laura," he continued. "Our child is there, and there can be no anger between us when we think of him."

She did not answer, but he could hear the sound of her sobs.

"Let us start the new life," he whispered, "and, if it must be without love, I will accept it. I will not thrust myself upon you. You shall live the life alone."

Still she was silent. She was not thinking of Tankerlane, but of John Shil, the man for whom she had given everything, and who had now deserted her in her darkest hour of trouble.

"Laura," Tankerlane cried passionately, "Laura, my wife, is there no happiness left in life for either of us?"

"There is none for me," she replied in a whisper so faint that he could scarcely catch the words. "But I will return with you to Laverstone—for my father's sake. Please leave me."

"Thank you, Laura," he replied simply. "You have saved me from a great sin."

He leant over the bed, took her hand in his for a moment, and then left the room.

But Laura still cried softly to herself.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE NEW LIFE

IN three weeks' time Laura Tankerlane returned to Laverstone with her husband. It was known that she had been seriously ill, but no one suspected that she had left Tankerlane Court in order to join her life with that of another man, and that she would have done so but for the intervention of Providence. It was generally reported that the death of her child had been the cause of her illness, and that her mind had been slightly unhinged by pain and sorrow. Tankerlane did not trouble to contradict these rumours. He wished it to be clearly understood that for the present, at any rate, Lady Tankerlane would receive no callers and accept no invitations, and it occurred to him that the theory about his wife's state of mind would provide an explanation of the life they lived at Tankerlane Court. They each had their own suite of apartments, and rarely met for more than half an hour each day.

Laura, worn out with illness and sorrow, accepted this life as many a homeless outcast has accepted the quietude of a prison cell. After the storm and stress of passion, it had a dull peace of its own that at any rate provided rest for a mind that had been tossed on the winds and waves of a great love.

Her illness, indeed, had wrought a change in her views of life. She realised that God had intervened to save her from sin and that He had spared her life in order that she might use it for the happiness of others. She thrust John Shil out of her thoughts, not because her love for him was dead, but because she saw the sinfulness of that love. There was nothing to take its place but a quiet desire to better the lives of other people, and help those who were too weak to help themselves.

She was ripe for religious enthusiasm, and in the hands of a great and fervent teacher she might have developed religious

mania. But the quiet and learned rector of Laverstone was not the man to set a human soul on fire.

"The poor," he said, "are always with us. And they do not only want money. They want sympathy."

And so it came about that Lady Tankerlane began to devote her life to good works, and never in the memory of living man had the district round Laverstone enjoyed such a period of prosperity and bounty. Tankerlane, anxious to win his wife's affection, wrote cheques for everything that was wanted. Churches were rebuilt and redecorated; livings were re-endowed, and the Rev. John Hardy was not forgotten. Schools and hospitals were presented with what they required to make them efficient. Food, coals, blankets, even books were to be had for the asking. And none of these gifts were dispensed in that cold and judicial manner which belongs to well-regulated charity. Lady Tankerlane herself inquired into every case, and often her presence and the words of comfort which came from her lips were of more value to the recipient than the gifts which followed.

Such was the life which Lady Tankerlane had elected to lead, and for a whole month it continued. And, then, like a stone dropped into a peaceful lake, there came a letter to Tankerlane Court.

The envelope was addressed in a handwriting that she did not know, but it bore the postmark of Pingee. And, when she opened it, and turned to the end, she saw the name of John Shil, but the signature was not in John Shil's handwriting.

The letter from John Shil was an almost illegible scrawl, for, though the envelope had been addressed by his secretary, he had been obliged to write the letter himself. But Laura set to work to decipher it with as much care as a Syriac scholar gives to some priceless fragment of stone, and she finally mastered every word of it.

It ran as follows:—

"DEAR LAURA,—In the first days of my sorrow and darkness I resolved that it would be better to keep silence, and never write to you again.

"But after much thought—and I have had many hours in which to think—I have decided to break my resolve, firstly, because it is possible that they have told you nothing of what has happened to me, and it is right that you should know, and

secondly, because at last I have learned the truth about your marriage to William Tankerlane.

"Firstly, then, Laura, I must tell you that I have lost the use of my sight, and Sir William Carr, the great oculist, informs me that I shall be blind all the rest of my life.

"Secondly, I have learnt why you refused to marry me, and why you married Tankerlane. I also know that Leonore was the legal wife of the man who trapped you into a dishonourable alliance. I cannot write the thoughts that come into my mind when I think of this. I only pray to God that I and William Tankerlane may never meet again, for if we meet, I shall kill him.

"As for yourself, Laura, the greatness of your sacrifice shames me into silence ; the agony of it burns me ; I am dumb and helpless in the presence of such a martyrdom. If recompense were in my power I would give it at the cost of my life and my honour. As it is, I cannot even thank you. I should rather curse you for the burden you have laid upon my soul, if I did not realise that this is part of my punishment.

"Laura, we shall never meet again. This much I owe you, beloved, and this much I will pay. I have ruined your life, and, when you lay at the point of death, I swore to God that I would tempt you to no further sin. Things have gone very wrong for us, dearest. I have been punished, and you, good, sweet, and noble woman that you are, have been punished for my sake.

"But there is still a life for you, Laura, a life in which you may do much good in the world. You have wealth and a tender heart, and there is much suffering which money and kindness can alleviate. Your husband, bitterly though I hate him for the wrong he did you, has sinned, like others, in the name of love. I know he loves you dearly and will do all that he can to make you happy, and help you in your charity. But I know also that the claims on the pocket of a great landed proprietor in these days are many and difficult to meet. I have more money than I know what to do with—and though I may possibly do some good with it, yet I am hindered by my infirmity. I have to-day signed a deed of gift, making over to you the sum of £100,000, which I desire you to use in the cause of the helpless and oppressed.

"As for myself, Laura, I shall do my best to live out my life without causing further harm to others. My engagement to

Leonore has been broken off. After what has happened, the marriage would have been impossible, and, apart from that, I refuse to burden any woman with the care of a blind and helpless man.

"I am in the great darkness, beloved, and there will be no light for me on this earth, save the memory of your dear face.

"May God bless you and keep you from all harm is the earnest prayer of one who will love you always.—JOHN SHIL."

Laura Tankerlane spelt out the ill-written words one by one, until she reached the end of the letter. Then she raised the sheets of paper to her lips, and the hot tears blurred her sight. So this was the end of all. John Shil was to be blind, helpless, and alone, and she was to live out her life as the wife of Sir William Tankerlane. She was never again to see the man she loved, and, perhaps, he would never write to her again. This was to be the calm after the fierce storm which had wrecked both their lives. For her the thrusting aside of self, and the peace which can be found in the doing of good works. For him the loneliness and the darkness. It was for this that she had sacrificed her happiness, for this that he had defied all the laws of God and man. This was to be the end. Her heart ached at the thought of the dreary darkness which had closed over the life of the man she loved. She pictured him friendless and alone, groping for everything he wanted, dependent on others for all his simplest wants. Schools, churches, charities, endowments, the sufferings of the poor, the wants of the widow and the orphan, all faded into nothingness before the thought of this one helpless man.

Then she rose suddenly to her feet with a cry of anguish, and thrust the letter into the fire.

"Oh God," she cried, "be merciful to him. Lighten his darkness, I beseech Thee, oh Lord."

But as the words found their way to her lips, the wild thought came to her that she would leave everything and go to him. That she would give up her position, her work among the poor, her honour as a wife, her hope of God's forgiveness, and go once more to Black Hall, as she had done the day before her illness. He had broken off his engagement to Leonore, and was a free man. He would not think of Tankerlane, and perhaps would be even glad to do his enemy an injury. In the previous instance it was the thought of

Leonore that had restrained him. Now there was nothing to separate two people who loved each other, if they were both willing to face the censure of the world.

Yes, she would go to him ; she would once more give up everything for his sake. He would not be able to resist her pleadings. He was weak and helpless ; his heart was crying out for a loving hand to lead him, for a loving voice to comfort him, for loving eyes to see for him. How could he resist her? Already he had fallen from his high resolve. He had, by his own confession, resolved never to write to her. Yet he had written. He had been unable to keep silence. How should he resist her, if he heard her voice, and felt the touch of her hand? No man could be strong enough to choose a life of lonely darkness to a life of love and happiness. Long years lay before both of them. They would spend them in doing good to others. Hand in hand they would walk through their vale of sorrow until they reached the end of the path, and then—ah, what then ?

Her train of thought stopped at the question she could not answer. She stared at the crackling ashes of the letter in the grate, as though the blackened words could speak to her of the hereafter.

"What then?" she said aloud, "ah, what then, beloved?"

And in the silence a few words came back as answer to her question, words that she had known from childhood.

"First the death—and then the judgment."

She repeated them to herself a dozen times, as though trying to grasp their meaning. Then, with a low moan of pain, she sank on her knees and prayed to God. The dream was over. She saw the reality of the thing she intended to do. It stood out clear in all its hideous nakedness.

"Oh God, forgive me," she cried, "give me strength to do Thy will. Give him strength to bear his sorrow. Let me dedicate my life to Thee. Keep me from sin, from the very thought of sin. Help me, oh God, for I am weaker than a child."

She buried her face in her hands, and there was silence, and in that silence she cast out the devil from her heart.

The new life had begun for Laura Tankerlane, and the past was dead.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SMOULDERING FIRES

A YEAR passed by with steps that dragged slowly and painfully for all those concerned in the tragedy which sprang from Ben Holland's death in the Round Plantation.

Leonore Jackson had flung herself heart and soul into her work, and had tried to forget her sorrow in the excitement and toil of her art, in the applause of thousands, in the wild pleasure which comes to all those who can move the hearts of their fellow-men. Triumph had followed triumph, and she had attained a position second to that of no actress in the world. In the portrayal of those characters which called for tragic intensity she had no living rival. Passion, hatred, revenge, fierce love which consumes the heart, and fires the brain, the extreme agony of mental sorrow, all these were emotions which she gave to her spellbound audiences, as though they were part of her very life. She was acclaimed as a mistress of her art, and little did the critics think, when they spoke of her marvellous realism, that she was only baring her natural heart and soul to the eyes of the public.

John Shil's life was the exact antithesis to Leonore's. What Leonore vainly sought in passionate excitement, he sought in study and solitude, and he sought equally in vain. All the days were the same to him, and for that matter all the nights as well, save when he slept. He lived in his endless gloom, as the Prisoner of Chillon might have lived. The whole world was open to his feet, yet his blindness shut out everything like a prison wall. He sought forgetfulness in the silence and found it not.

And during that year he devoted vast sums of money to charity, but he was much hampered by his infirmity, and most of that real work which constitutes true philanthropy had to

be left in the hands of his secretary. He tried to take an interest in the sorrows and necessities of others, but was only partially successful. They seemed too far away from him, scarcely more than characters in some book, unreal phantoms that cried out for help. He gave freely, but he took only a passing interest in either his gifts or the recipients of them.

He needed much to occupy his mind in those days of darkness, and he sought distraction in a thousand ways. He was a man who had read little. For during most of his life he had been generally too tired out with physical exertion to care for anything but novels. Now, however, he set to work to cultivate his intellect, and he employed an educated man to read aloud and discuss works of real importance, books that required thought and careful study. He listened to a long course of philosophical works, from Plato to Nietzsche, but found no comfort in any of them.

Laura Tankerlane, after that one brief moment of temptation, returned to her good works and her religion, and during that year many hundreds of people had good reason to bless her name. She was, indeed, the true Lady Bountiful, a type rare enough in these days, when most of the great ladies are so occupied with bridge and golf and the claims of society, that they have barely time to look after their own children, and certainly no time to spare for the children of others. Through all the wide area of the Tankerlane estates she passed like an angel with wings of light. The sick child, the surly labourer, the peevish housewife, the drunken thief of a gipsy all found a friend alike in the beautiful Lady Tankerlane.

No act of kindness was too trivial for her personal attention, no costly scheme of charity too great for her personal supervision. She had known deep sorrow, and could help others in their grief. She had known temptation, and could help her frail sisters to fight against it. She had known love, and she could detect and cherish the spark of it in the hardest human heart.

And of all the three who were trying to forget, she alone found some comfort in her work, and came nearest to happiness. But she bore the marks of suffering on her white face, and her beauty seemed almost too frail for this rough life. It was the opinion of the countryside that she was not destined to live to old age.

"'Tis the sperrit," said one old farmer, "'tis the blessed sperrit

within her as burns away the flesh. God bless her, and bring back the roses to her cheek. I'm thinkin' she's frettin' away."

He was not far from the truth. Laura Tankerlane's health was breaking down under the strain. She had thrust all thought of John Shil aside, but the struggle had wounded her to the heart. The outward calm only concealed a fierce unrest, which prompted her to toil day and night for the good of others. Like Leonore, who had flung all her soul into her art, she had flung all her soul into religion and charity. But whereas the one found no distraction in the delirious triumphs of the stage, the other found such peace as proceeds from the consciousness of good deeds. Yet this peace was won at the expense of her bodily strength, for the religious excitement which had destroyed all earthly passions, had proved too fierce for a constitution that had already been weakened by severe illness.

Her attitude towards her husband had changed considerably during the past year. She no longer shrank from him, or showed any signs of resentment at his efforts to make her love him. She treated him with kindness, and even with respect. In the midst of the various duties which she had imposed on herself, she never forgot those little details of domestic life which might ensure his comfort. But there was a barrier between them which nothing could ever break down. It was invisible to the eyes of others, but as solid as the wall of ice that cuts off the Antarctic Land from all explorers. He tried to make love to her, and she did not even rebuke him. She only listened in silence, and the words died away on his lips. A single glance at her face was enough to convince him that she had placed herself beyond the reach of all earthly passions, and that Religion itself had set a trench around her which he could never pass. On these occasions he would start with a few passionate words of love and entreaty. Then he would pause and hesitate, stammer out a few more words, and give up the task. Yet he never reproached her. He apparently took his punishment like a man.

But Tankerlane, in spite of the self-restraint he exercised on these occasions, was beginning to reach the end of his patience. For a whole year he tried to win his wife's love, by every measure in his power, and the more she repulsed him, the more fiercely did he long to break down the barrier between them. He chafed bitterly at her indifference, and, though he repressed his anger, it would have been better if he

had not done so, for the pent-up fires accumulated till his strength of mind was no longer able to restrain them.

It was after one of his vain attempts at love-making that the crust of the volcano was at last shattered, and the red-hot stream of his wrath poured out in a torrent of words. He had been pleading gently for his wife's love, and she had listened to him with a calm, white face. Then, as usual, he paused, hesitated, and stammered out a few broken sentences, which were frozen into silence. Then he rose to his feet and walked towards the door, but before he reached it, he turned and came back with clenched hands and blazing eyes.

And then the storm broke, a storm of bitter invective, and sneers, and accusations, and foul oaths that no woman could hear without shame.

But Laura faced him unflinchingly, with pale lips, and quiet pity in her eyes. She realised that she had come to another turning point on the steep road of her life, and that she might yet once more have to decide between good and evil, and that she would need all the strength of her religion to guide her steps aright.

At last the fury of Tankerlane's outburst exhausted itself, and he stood waiting for a reply with flushed face and quivering limbs. All the good of the past year had been swept away in that one tirade of extravagant abuse. The man had forgotten himself, and had forgotten the respect due to a woman. He had spoken like a madman. All that he had suffered found vent in foul language and bitter denunciation.

Yet Laura did not wince as she listened to him. She stood like some calm and beautiful saint with pity in her eyes. She knew well enough what this last year must have meant to the man who loved her with all his heart and soul. How even her life of piety and charity must have eaten into his heart. Yet he had never protested, and had given her all the help in his power. He had never thrust his society on her; he had pleaded to her for the love she denied him, but his pleadings had never passed a certain point. Her silence had always checked them, and he had retired from the struggle without even a word of rebuke.

And now that he had lost all his self-control, and was behaving more like a brute beast than an English gentleman, she did not even resent his language, though the wife of a costermonger might have fled from it with her fingers in her ears. A year ago she would have turned from him with disgust

and loathing, but she had learnt to be more charitable to the sins of others. She realised how he must have suffered before he allowed himself to give way to this horrible outburst. She trembled for the consequences, for she knew that this interview might mark another epoch in her life. But she remembered that a soft answer turneth away wrath, and she hoped to avert a fierce catastrophe.

Yet she did not know how to meet the furious man who had heaped insult after insult on her head, and was silent.

"Have you nothing to say?" he cried harshly, after a pause. "Why do you stand there like a plaster saint? Have you no answer to give me?"

A bitter rebuke, a few words of unutterable scorn came into her mind, but she checked them before they rose to her lips.

"I have no answer to give you," she replied meekly, "save that I am to blame, and I am sorry for you."

"You are my wife," he exclaimed hoarsely, "yet you have been no wife to me. Is this what you have learnt from religion—to be kind and gracious to everyone but your husband, to devote your life to charity, and neglect the man who needs your love?"

"I have tried to do my duty to you," she replied with downcast eyes.

"Your duty, yes; and you have done it well—as a house-keeper, as a friend, but as a wife—I ask for love and you give me duty; for bread and you give me a stone."

"You know I cannot love you," she replied sadly. "I would do so, if I could control my heart. But love cannot come from an effort of the will. I can only give you all that is in my power. I look after your comfort; I try to make you happy."

He stepped forward and caught her in his arms. "Happy," he cried fiercely, "do you think I can ever be happy till I have won your love?" He looked down at her face with passionate eyes, and bent his head as if to kiss her. But, as he did so, his soul revolted against the act. It seemed almost a sacrilege to defile that white face with the touch of earthly passion.

He shuddered, and let go of his wife, though she had not even tried to free herself from his embrace.

"You cold, beautiful saint," he exclaimed. "Why don't you cry out? Why don't you strike me in the face? Why don't you revile me for the words I have used? It would be better than this silence, than this quiet submission. When

I touch you, it is like touching a block of ice. But I cannot endure it longer. We must part. You must go your way, and I must go mine. I do not know what will happen if we live together any longer. Perhaps I shall go mad, and strangle you. It will be better for us to be apart. I cannot live like this."

"I have tried so hard," she faltered. "No one knows that I am anything but a loving wife—and I have tried—to make it easy for you."

"Give me love," he thundered, holding out his hands, "that is all I want; give me love."

"I have no love to give," she replied. "I have dedicated my life to the poor and suffering."

"Yes, yes," he cried, "but what of me? You can find peace in your good deeds; but what have I to take the place of love? Do you think that this dreary country life satisfies me, that a round of dinners and garden parties is all that I want; that shooting and hunting and fishing can fill up my life? What of me, Laura, with no serious object in life to distract my thoughts? Do you think that I can endure it?"

"There are many things a man can do, many things into which he can fling himself heart and soul. Politics, for instance; why don't you stand for Parliament?"

"Bah!" he cried angrily. "I haven't brain enough to take any place in politics, and I don't wish to be a silent member of a back seat. No, Laura, we must part. I am going to leave you. I shall go abroad. Perhaps the doctor has ordered it for my health. Perhaps I want to shoot big game—something that will strike back and not roll over like a rabbit. Any excuse will do. I shall leave you at once."

"I can go, if you wish me to. This is your house, your own home."

"No, Laura," he replied firmly, "you are better here. Go on with the work you have begun. Perhaps you will think more kindly of me when I am away. I cannot hope that you will ever respect me again after the words I have used to you to-day. The devil within me spoke. For months I have tried to control myself. I can do it no longer. You know now what to expect of me if I stay here. But there shall be no repetition of this scene. I am going to leave at once. There will be no scandal."

She looked at him with pity in her eyes. Never before had he appeared in so favourable a light. She forgot the words h

had uttered in the first moments of his fury. She only remembered the long months in which he had submitted to the conditions she had imposed upon him. Even now he intended to leave Tankerlane Court, so that she could continue her work among the poor and suffering. How different from the old days, when he would have been more courteous in his language, but hard and cruel as a slave-driver.

"I am so sorry," she said gently. "I thought—I had hoped that a new life had commenced for both of us—a life of peace, without love, but without anger."

"A new life?" he said with a bitter laugh. "Ah, yes, for you, Laura, with your schools and your hospitals and your poor. A new life has opened out for you. But for me—I am still what I was—the man who sacrificed all that he had to gain you; who counted sin and shame and dishonour as nothing if only he could accomplish his desire. I am still that man, Laura, and my passion is so hot within me that I must leave here, or I shall kill you."

Laura was silent, but she looked at Tankerlane piteously. His departure would make her life smooth and peaceful, yet she did not like to drive him from his home. She felt almost ashamed of her coldness, though she knew that the man had wrecked her life, and that he could never be anything to her. And then there was the future. He could not stay away from Tankerlane Court for the rest of his life.

"I had better go," she said in a low voice. "I can carry on my work elsewhere. There is that money Mr Shil gave me. You would not let me touch it. But I can do a lot of good with it."

"I have plenty of money of my own," he replied savagely. "I have never stinted you, and I shall not do so when I am away. I shall place £10,000 a year at your disposal. Out of this you will be able to keep up Tankerlane Court, and have a surplus to devote to charity."

"Ten thousand pounds a year," she repeated. "You speak as if you were going away for years."

"I do not know how long I shall be away," he answered, "but it will be for some time—long enough for me to learn to control myself."

"I cannot live here alone. What will my father think? What will other people think?"

Tankerlane smiled. "I know you well enough, Laura," he

replied, "to know that you care little for the opinion of others. As for your father, tell him the truth. He will understand and be silent. As for your neighbours—well, lots of men go away to shoot big game, and stay away for a very long time."

"Are you not afraid of me? It will be a great temptation for me."

"No," he answered proudly. "I am not afraid. I believe you to be a good woman."

"But you must return some day."

"Oh yes, I shall return. I shall forget you, and then I shall return."

A week afterwards Sir William Tankerlane left the home of his forefathers to shoot lions in Central Africa. He had settled up all his business affairs, given his final instructions to his agent, and had booked his passage. The carriage was waiting at the door, and his luggage had already been forwarded to Southampton. It only remained to say good-bye to Lady Tankerlane.

He found her in the morning room, which looked out across the park towards Laverstone. From the window the spire of the little church could be seen through the leafless trees.

"I'm just off," he said carelessly, as though he were going up to town for a week.

She did not speak. She was standing by the window, and the spire of the church seemed to sway a little as she looked at it.

"Good-bye, Laura," he said in a low voice, "much may happen before we meet again. But before I go, I want your forgiveness for all the wrong I have done you."

She was silent, and still looked out of the window at the church among the trees.

"You will not miss me," he continued; "on the contrary, you will be well rid of me. But I should like you to try to think that I am not altogether bad, and that I have chiefly sinned because I loved you."

Still she did not answer, but the thin line of the spire quivered like a reed in the wind.

"I have fixed up everything for you. I know that while I am away you will not be worried with any unpleasant business. I should also like to know that you are thinking of me with kindness."

She did not reply, but he came over to her side and looked across the park.

"The only link between us," he said in a low voice, "is broken. Our child—I have often thought that if he had lived he might have brought us together. But he lies yonder. He is silent; he cannot speak for me. Yet, perhaps, when you think of him, you will speak less harshly of his father."

She turned to him with a white face, and held out her hands.

"Good-bye," she said; "I forgive you, as I hope that God will forgive me."

"Thank you," he said simply, as he raised her hand to his lips. "That is all I ask—just your forgiveness."

He dropped her hand, and left the room without another word.

And Laura Tankerlane still gazed out across the trees, and tried to remember a single word of love that she had ever spoken to this man.

But in after years she was glad to think that she had forgiven him, not only with her lips but with her heart.

CHAPTER XL

THE CANEWDON CASTLE

"You want a change," said Dr Hardy, as he sat in the library at Black Hall and looked at Shil's white, drawn face and trembling hands. "You must get out of this place at once. The air of these marshlands is not good for a man like you. I should advise a sea voyage."

"A change of scene, eh?" Shil replied grimly. "You forget."

"No, a change of air, my dear fellow. After all, there is nothing to see out in the ocean, and a blind man is as well off as anyone else. Go out to the Cape and back. It will do you a world of good. Take your secretary and occupy your mind with light literature. This sort of thing," and he picked up one of Max Nordau's works, "is enough to kill any man. Read something more cheerful than Nordau."

"I admit that he is unsatisfying," said Shil. "Well, I'll try a change of air, doctor. This place is stifling all the life out of me. I can hardly breathe. I think I'd rather like to hear the swish of the waves, though I heard too much of them once."

And that very night Mr Martin, the secretary, booked a deck cabin on the *Caneudon Castle*, which left for Capetown in a fortnight. John Shil realised the value of the doctor's advice. His health was breaking down under the strain. He required a change of air, and life on board ship would be tolerable. It did not matter to him where the ship was bound for. If she were to drop anchor off the Needles, he would derive just as much benefit from the voyage. There would at any rate be the sound of voices round him, and the cheerful bustle of life.

Nothing indeed could be more dreary than the lonely months at Black Hall. The eternal darkness was beginning to prey upon his mind, and he was faced with the awful prospect of madness. As Leonore had foretold, he was strong at first, but

he had grown weaker day by day. The idea of suicide was becoming more and more definite in his mind. The immorality of the act was scarcely perceptible in his own case. He was helpless and useless, a mere burden on society. Life has no place for derelicts. They should be destroyed and sunk deep in the sea of death.

And self-destruction was so easy. More than once he had fumbled his way to the desk which held a loaded revolver, and had taken the weapon in his hand. He had only to place the muzzle to his temple, pull the trigger, and lo! there would be an end to all the darkness and all the pain. No magician's wand was more wonderful than that slender tube of steel.

Yet he had hesitated. He had not been afraid of death, but afraid of what his death might mean to Laura Tankerlane. Each time he had seen her face in the darkness, and her eyes and lips had pleaded to him.

"Well," he said to himself as Dr Hardy left the room, "here is the last chance. I will see if a change of life is likely to do me good. If it does not, I shall know what to expect. I shall go mad and kill myself."

A fortnight later the *Canewdon Castle* steamed slowly down Southampton Water, and swung westwards on her journey to the Cape.

John Shil stood on deck with Mr Martin by his side. He looked towards the shore, and though sea and land were both alike to him, he felt the same emotion that comes to everyone on board an outward-bound ship. In his mind's eye he could see the land fading into the distance, and the broad stretch of water before him. He could hear the throb of the engines, and realised that every stroke of the piston took him farther from home. He could even hear the flutter of waving handkerchiefs, and the last cries of those on shore, and then he heard the sob of a woman, going, perhaps, to spend her life in a land where she would never see her loved ones again.

He himself had nothing to leave, save darkness, but the sense of parting on board a liner is magnetic, and even the loneliest soul throbs at the touch of it.

Then suddenly he heard a voice that he knew—just a few words to a cabin steward about some luggage.

He did not turn round, or speak, or even move. But his hands gripped the iron rail as though he would tear it from the deck.

It was the voice of Sir William Tankerlane.

Tankerlane was not aware of Shil's presence on the ship until she was two days out from Southampton. Head winds and a rough sea in the Channel soon sent him to his cabin in the throes of sea-sickness, and for forty-eight hours he did not leave his bunk. Then he happened to peruse the list of passengers and saw the name of Mr John Shil.

His first impulse was to remain out of sight in his cabin, and then he remembered that Shil could not see him, and he resolved to merely keep out of the blind man's way. He had only to be silent when his enemy was near to him, and all would be well. He did not know that Shil had already heard his voice. It was indeed a most unfortunate circumstance which had brought them together on the same steamer. But there could be no violent scene between them if they did not meet. Tankerlane was not afraid of a blind and helpless man, but he knew that long months of loneliness and gloom might have driven John Shil to the verge of madness.

Shil, on the other hand, was well aware that Tankerlane was on board, and the circumstance did not make for that peace of mind which was one of the main objects of his voyage.

"Martin," he said to his secretary, when they were alone in their cabin, "there is a passenger on this ship whom I know, for I heard his voice. His name is Sir William Tankerlane. I want you to find out whether his wife is on board, where he is going to, and all about him. You must do this without attracting comment. Get into conversation with him, if possible, but do so at once, before he finds out that you have any connection with me."

The faithful Martin, although he was nothing of a detective, accomplished his task, and Shil learnt that Sir William Tankerlane was going to Africa to shoot big game, and that Lady Tankerlane was not on board.

These two simple facts provided ample food for thought, and John Shil, who had left Black Hall to seek distraction from his thoughts of the woman who was lost to him, was compelled, by cruel chance, to think of her from morning to night. He wondered what had happened. Perhaps Laura had left her husband for good and all. Perhaps she had gone down to Essex. At any rate, they had parted, and probably for a long time.

He turned these thoughts over in the darkness, and they

tormented his mind, till he almost resolved to send for Sir William Tankerlane and ask for the truth. But he was able to control himself in this hour of uncertainty, and he kept silence. He knew that Tankerlane must be aware of his presence on the boat, and that the man was purposely avoiding him. The voyage would only last three weeks. It would be better that he and Tankerlane should not meet. He could find out all he wanted to know when he returned to England.

And so, every day, the two men passed each other on the deck; and Tankerlane showed no signs of recognition, and Shil did not even know that his enemy was near to him, for he had told Martin never to mention the man's name again, and Tankerlane's voice never came to him out of the chatter and laughter of the passengers.

Yet each man was tortured by a knowledge of the other's presence, and Tankerlane shrank from the very sight of the man whom Laura loved. And John Shil lived in a hell of suspicion and uncertainty. Every footstep and every laugh might mean the approach of Tankerlane. He detected the presence of the man in every sound, in the scent of every cigar. The whole atmosphere of the ship seemed foul and loathsome, and even the salt breath of the sea choked him. There would be no pure air on the *Caneudon Castle* till the vessel reached Capetown.

And all the time the great ship ploughed her way southwards, inexorable as fate, and as regardless of the loves and hatreds of the passengers as the circling of the earth itself. Her huge iron hull, and her gigantic engines, took no account of the small black ants which clustered between her decks. Southwards and ever southwards she drove through the calm seas—between two long furrows of foam, the embodiment of all the life that human skill and labour can fashion out of dead steel and iron—a thing almost with a soul, and with moods of her own, as many a sailor could have testified.

The weather was glorious, and even Tankerlane would have enjoyed the passage under happier circumstances. Smooth seas and blue skies and soft breezes combined to make the voyage delightful to a crowd of laughing and flirting passengers. There were no dangers ahead, no rocks, no sandbanks, no narrow channels; nothing but the broad, deep sea, safe and smooth as a high road.

Yet there was death lurking in those safe and peaceful



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waters, a death that comes neither on the wings of the storm, nor in the snarl of waves, nor in the threatening overhang of dark crags and boiling surf, but a death that lies silent, unmarked, and unseen.

Two months previously the *Thora*, an outward-bound ship of 2000 tons, had been overtaken by a storm, had become water-logged, and had been deserted by her crew. She had carried a cargo of timber and iron rails, and whereas the iron tried to sink her, the timber just kept her afloat, and she lay in the sea, without masts and with the water just awash of her deck—as solid as a rock and as nasty a thing as any vessel could expect to meet in the darkness.

CHAPTER XLI

THE DERELICT

"PLEASE go to Sir William Tankerlane," said Shil to his secretary, "and tell him that I should like the honour of his company in my stateroom after dinner for a smoke and a chat."

Mr Martin left the large deck cabin, and when he had closed the door, Shil rose from his chair to call him back. But he did not move forward or cry out, and after a moment's hesitation, he resumed his seat.

For several days he had been contemplating the possibility of this interview, and had finally decided that it would be desirable if he could only control himself in Tankerlane's presence. He felt that he could not endure the suspense any longer. His health was breaking down under the strain, and so far the voyage had done him more harm than good. He did not trouble himself about Tankerlane's plans; but he wished to know what had happened to Laura. She might have left him for good and all; or she might even be dead.

No harm could come from such an interview so long as he could control himself. But it was the uncertainty of this that had impelled him to rise from his chair to recall his secretary. Then he had conquered his weakness, and resolved to see the thing through. It was, of course, possible that Sir William Tankerlane would refuse to meet him.

In a few minutes, however, Martin returned with a message from Tankerlane, saying that the latter would be delighted to accept the invitation.

John Shil dined, as was his custom, in his cabin, which was large, and fitted up as a sitting-room, and an hour after he had finished his meal, there was a knock at the door, and Sir William Tankerlane entered.

Mr Martin at once left the room, to carry on an interesting flirtation with a young lady who was going out to the Cape to get married to the manager of a mine on the Rand.

"Please sit down," said Shil politely, "and help yourself to a drink and a cigar."

"Thank you," Tankerlane replied stiffly, as he took a seat on the sofa which was subsequently to be converted into a bed. "Can I hand you a cigar?"

"No, thanks. I have given up smoking. It gives no pleasure to the blind."

"I have heard so. Very curious fact that. It shows that the pleasure of smoking is rather imaginary, does it not?"

"I heard your voice the other day," said Shil, after a long pause, "and I thought I'd like to have a word with you."

Tankerlane did not answer. He was studying Shil's face, and noting the terrible marks of pain and sorrow in every feature of it.

"I have been very ill," Shil continued, "and am taking this voyage for my health. So far, I'm sorry to say, it has not done me much good."

"I am sorry to hear that. You don't look well."

"I wished to see you," Shil exclaimed suddenly, "because of Lady Tankerlane. I want to know how she is. You can be quite frank with me. I and Laura are never likely to meet again."

Tankerlane's face darkened with passion, and then, as he saw this wreck of a strong man before him, he felt ashamed of his thoughts.

"Laura is quite well, thank you," he replied. "She is very busy with her poor, and her schools, and cottage hospitals. By the bye, I could not allow her to make use of that gift of yours. It was kind of you, but you will understand that it was impossible for her to accept it, even to give it to others. I have allowed her more than its equivalent to use as she pleases."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Shil quietly. "I only wished her to take it, because I thought you couldn't spare it. When I was agent to the estates, there was little to spare for charity."

"There is plenty now. My father entertained a lot, and spent a deal of money in keeping up a great house in London. We do not entertain at all."

Shil was silent.

"This meeting is curious," said Tankerlane, breaking the silence with the first remark that came into his head. "We

last met on the sea. Rather a different craft this, eh, to the *Hope and Glory* of Gorehaven?"

"Yes," replied Shil with a faint smile, "a bit safer in a rough sea. She wouldn't even rock in the Darkwater."

"Yet you are unfortunate in your cruises," Tankerlane continued. "I was not pleased to see you on board. Some sailors would call you a Jonah."

Shil laughed harshly.

"There are Jonahs on land as well as on sea," he said bitterly. "There are some men who wreck the lives of all with whom they come in contact——" He paused, for he was speaking of Tankerlane, and he remembered that he had to control his feelings.

"I am one of them," he added hastily, "but I fancy the *Caneudon Castle* is too large to feel my influence. I am only like an ant in her colony of passengers."

"It is a calm, dark night," replied Tankerlane, "and the sea is as smooth as glass. The barometer is high, and we shall be in Table Bay in five days. I don't think, Shil, that you will be able to wreck——"

His speech was broken by a shock which sent him spinning from the sofa to the floor. John Shil went flying from his chair, and everything seemed to fall at once from the walls in a shower of broken glass and scattered raiment.

Tankerlane sprang to his feet and made for the door across a floor that sloped upwards. Then he looked back and saw Shil on his knees, groping with his hands for something to catch hold of. He rushed to his side, and, raising him to his feet, placed his hands on a brass rail.

"Stay there," he cried; "I'll see what's happened."

John Shil clung to the rail with his hands, and stared wildly into the darkness. He was helpless as a child. Through the open port hole he could hear a voice yelling out those words which mark the last moments of a ship:

"The women and children! The women and children!"

Tankerlane rushed out on to the deck and found a struggling mob of people, who seemed to pour from all sides, and even drop down from the velvety darkness overhead. Lights flashed and men shouted orders.

Then one of the crew came flying past, and Tankerlane caught him by the arm.

"What is it?" said Tankerlane.



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"Derelict—seventy foot of sheathing ripped up. Let go, damn you! There are women to be saved."

"There is a man in here who is blind and helpless as a woman. Can you get him into a boat? I'll give you a hundred pounds."

"Your money be damned," yelled the man; "money won't save you and I; she'll settle in five minutes. She's ripped to pieces."

"He is helpless," cried Tankerlane; but the man tore himself from the iron grasp.

Tankerlane looked for one moment at the black mob struggling in the light of a few oil lamps, and then he rushed back to the deck cabin. John Shil was still grasping the brass rail with his hands.

"Ship's going down," cried Tankerlane; "they're getting the women and children into the boats. Here, quick, I'll look after you."

He gripped his enemy by the arm, and dragged him out on to the deck.

The sailors had done their work smartly, but only half of the boats had been launched. Those that were full were being taken as far from the ship as possible. The others were picking up the people who kept dropping over the side into the water. It was quite evident that not half of the passengers would be saved.

Tankerlane rushed to the fore part of the ship, where the water had already reached the deck. He foresaw that, if the ship went down, there would be no chance of life in that struggling mass of humanity perched up on the stern.

Then he stumbled over a life-belt that had been torn from someone's grasp, and dropped in the darkness. It would mean much to anyone in the awful maelstrom which would come with the suction of the sinking ship. He hesitated for one second, and then thrust it over Shil's shoulders.

"One apiece," he cried above the roar of escaping steam and the shrieks of the passengers. "Jump over here, quick. The water's quite close. No, stay, I'll let you down. There you are, with your back to the ship. Now swim right away from it. I'll follow you."

John Shil struck out with all his strength, but Tankerlane hesitated to plunge into the water. He had just remembered that he could not swim.

He ran aft in the hope of getting near one of the boats. But before he had gone ten yards, there was a terrific explosion, and the vessel slid under the surface of the sea in a whirlpool of foam and a blinding cloud of steam.

Tankerlane jumped from the rail, and was sucked down into the depths with the sinking ship. But he rose again to the surface and tried to struggle for life. He cried out aloud, and beat wildly with his arms. A life-belt would have saved him. But he could not swim, and his cries were not heard, and he went down for the last time into the darkness.

It is often the worst men who rise to the greatest heights of heroism in times like these.

CHAPTER XLII

THE SILENCE

A WINTER'S moon shone clearly over the dark fringe of trees which surrounded the Tidal Pool at Black Hall. Against the clear frosty sky the twigs of the upper branches showed like some delicate tracery sketched out with ink on a piece of dark-blue paper.

There was no sound in that forgotten place save the distant cry of a bird in the marshes and the faint gurgle of the tide, and nothing moved save the water which had come up from the sea.

Then a faint sound broke the silence of the night. The snap of a twig, the rustle of a bough, the soft footsteps of someone creeping through the trees.

And then a few moments afterwards something moved at the fringe of the wood which faced the light, and there was the gleam of a white face near the foot of the trees. A figure stole quietly into the open, and the black dress of a woman stood out clear and distinct against the glittering grass. She looked round hastily, as though afraid that someone might be observing her movements. Then she walked rapidly forward to the wall and stared into the eddy of the waters.

For a few minutes she was still as one of the statues on the wall itself. Then she flung herself down on her knees and looked heavenwards at the round disc of the moon. Her elbows were on the parapet, her hands were clasped together, and her whole attitude was that of prayer.

Her white face was ghastly in the moonlight, and seemed whiter than anything there save the surface of the moon itself. It stood out like a cameo against the background of trees, as clear-cut and pale as the face of a dead woman.

"Oh God," cried Leonore, "give me strength. It was here he held me in his arms and asked me to be his wife."

Nothing moved in the stillness save the water. Trees, turf, and wall were motionless, and even the figure of Leonore might have been carved out of stone. Only the water gurgled through the culvert.

And then, far overhead, there came a faint sound to break the silence, the distant yelp of hounds. Nearer it came and nearer, till Leonore thought that some pack was in full cry across the marshland. She looked at the trees, as though she expected to see the dogs leap out from the wood. And then she looked at the blue sky and saw nothing, and then at the moon. A few black specks covered the surface, and that was all. She did not understand. She did not know that Gabriel's hounds were in pursuit of a human soul that night.

The sounds died away into silence, and once more she looked into the swirl of the pool. The shivering surface fascinated her, and she wondered what lay beneath that scintillating sheet of steel. Perhaps there was the secret of happiness in its depths. Perhaps the knowledge of things unseen. It looked cold and merciless, yet it could not be colder and more merciless than the world above it.

Leonore had come to that point in her life when she was able to face the prospect of death without regret and without terror. For a time she had existed on the mere excitement of praise and triumph, as a man might be kept alive with stimulants, or drugs. She had applied herself to her Art with that furious energy which is the outcome of highly-strung nerves. Nature exacts full payment for every debt, and the hour of reckoning had come.

The collapse had taken place one night on the stage itself, in the midst of a big scene which always tried her physical and mental powers to the utmost. All England knew that Leonore Jackson would be out of the cast at the Royal Theatre for many months to come.

But Leonore herself and the doctors, who had given their verdict, knew more than this.

"If you act again," said Sir William Turl, "I will not be answerable for your life. You require rest, and you must always live a quiet life. A single big scene may kill you."

Rest! There was a world of mockery in that word. She could never rest, so long as the man she loved kept her from his side.

After a while, when she had been crushed by the pain and

weariness of it, she resolved to seek the rest which she could never find on earth.

And so, half crazy with sorrow, and feeble from the effects of her physical distress, Leonore had crawled down to Black Hall to die. She had chosen the place where John Shil had held her in his arms, and kissed her lips.

She looked up at the cold moon and the keen frosty sky, and the clear outline of the trees. And, as she looked, she realised the vileness of the thing she was about to do.

"I am a coward," she said to herself. "I will go back to London and fight till the end."

But even as the thought came into her mind, a cloud of darkness rushed down upon her brain; the moon, the trees, the sky vanished. Something roared in her ears like the fall of many waters. She grasped at the air, swayed, tottered, and lost her footing.

For a moment the surface of the pool rocked in waves and foam. Then it gradually settled down into glassy stillness. Nothing rose from the depths.

Laura Tankerlane stood alone on the summit of the Stone-wold Hills and gazed out across the valley towards the setting sun.

In the valley the great grey mass of Tankerlane Court showed out against a background of green parkland. Laura looked at it without pride or affection. In a week's time she would be no longer mistress of its splendours. The new heir, Sir Henry Tankerlane, was to take possession of the estate. Laura knew that she would give up her position without regret. She intended to live with her father at the farm.

For the truth about the *Canewdon Castle* had come up to England at last. The sole survivors, forty-seven in number, had been picked up off a small island in the South Atlantic. John Shil was among them, but Sir William Tankerlane was numbered with the thousand odd who had perished.

Laura had received the news with that calm, white face and inward resignation which had now become the marks of her daily life. But before a few hours had passed, she was weeping bitterly.

"I sent him out to his death," she said, as she fell on her knees and prayed for the souls of those who had gone down

into the deep. "Oh, Lord, pardon him all his sins, and forgive me all the wrong I did him."

And then she had gone back to her work among the poor and suffering, and she had toiled with redoubled vigour, as though life held nothing else for her.

She was returning on foot from some errand of mercy on the other side of the hills when she paused and watched the sun sink down behind the distant mountains.

Then far below her she saw the figures of two men toiling slowly up the road from Laverstone.

As they came closer, she recognised the great stooping body of one of them. He leant on the arm of his companion, and the ascent seemed to tax all his physical powers.

She moved down the slope to meet them.

"Mr Shil," she said gently, as she came to his side.

"Yes, it is I, Lady Tankerlane," he replied. "Where is your hand?"

She gave it to him and he held it for a moment. Then he turned to his companion.

"Please return to the village, Martin," he said, "and tell them to get supper ready at the inn."

John Shil and Laura were alone.

"Laura," he said quietly, "do you know how it is that I am here—alive?"

She did not answer him. She did not understand the question, and it did not seem to require an answer.

"I am here," he continued, "because your husband gave his life for mine. In the crash and confusion of the wreck he kept by my side. He gave me his life-belt. He told me there were two of them. I did not learn till afterwards from another of the survivors that William Tankerlane was without a life-belt when the end came. He gave his life for mine, Laura."

They were both silent for a few moments, and looked out across the valley to the black rampart of the Welsh hills.

"I came here to tell you this," he continued. "I thought you would like to know. I sent you a telegram this morning, but I suppose you didn't get it. They told me where you had gone, and I came to meet you."

"I am glad you have come," she replied. "It is getting dark. Shall we return?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "it is getting dark. Laura, do you

know, I have dared to think that your husband saved my life for your sake—because he knew—because he——”

“Let us go home,” said Laura gently.

“I shall return to Black Hall to-morrow,” he said. “In a year’s time I should like to come back to Laverstone and see you again. May I come back—when a year has passed?”

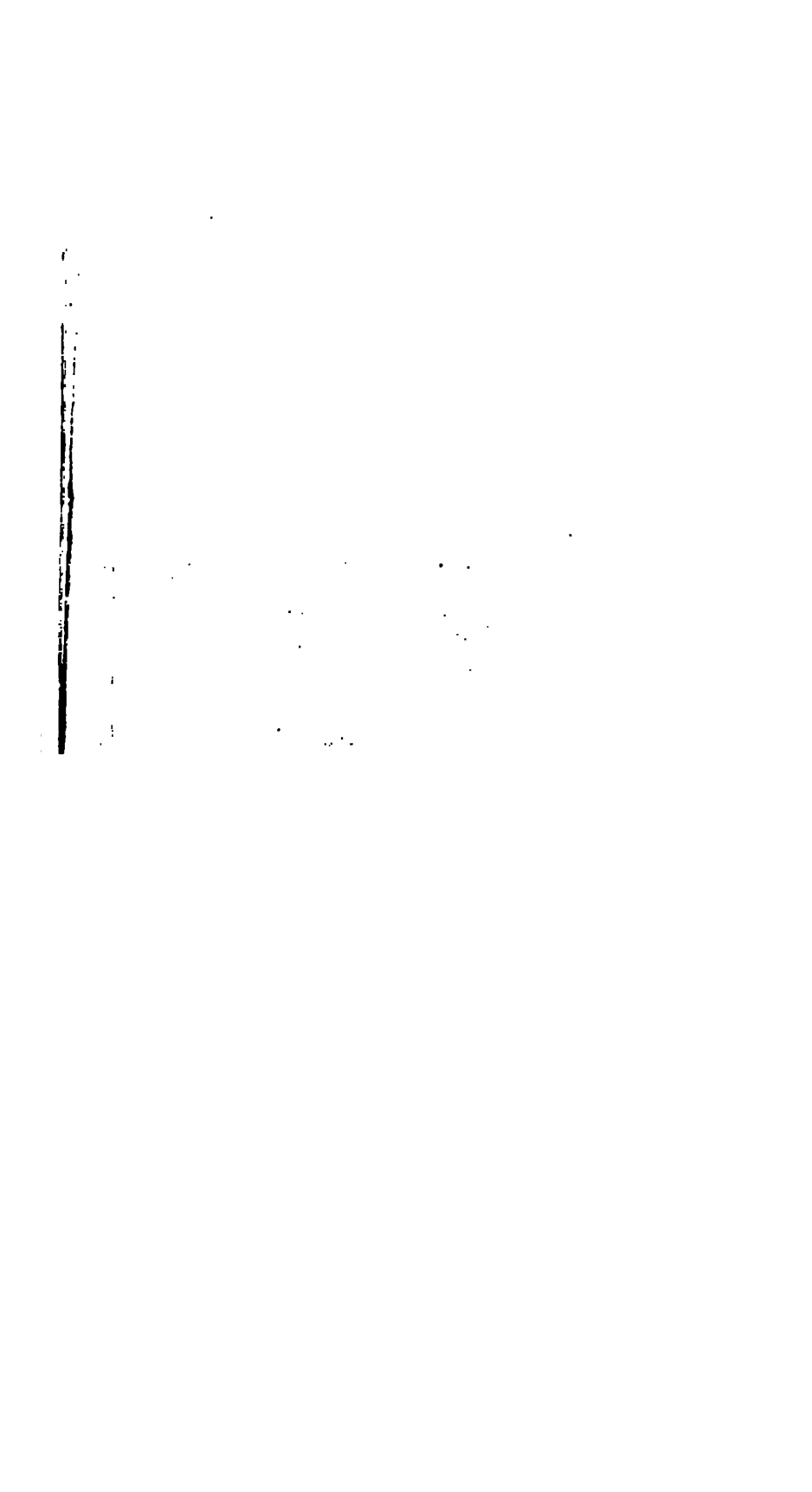
“Let us go home,” she replied, “it is getting dark.”

“In a year’s time,” he persisted, “may I come again to Laverstone?”

“Yes,” she replied, in a low voice. “I think he wished it.”

And together they passed from the sunlit hills to the twilight in the valley beneath.

THE END



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